

# *Peace Comes to Colombia, Government and FARC-EP Sign Historic Peace Deal*

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Cartagena de Indias, September 27 (RHC-Agencies) -- Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) leader Timoleon Jimenez signed a historic peace deal Monday, ending the country's decades-long armed conflict.

Accompanied by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the presidents of Cuba, Ecuador and other Latin American countries, the two leaders signed the agreement, which was finalized last month after more than four years of negotiations in the Cuban capital.

Addressing participants in Monday's signing ceremony, Ban Ki-moon praised the Colombian people, whom he said "never lost hope in peace."

The UN chief also hailed the fact that the peace process had brought "victims to the forefront." He said: "What they have lost can never be returned. Yet victims have been among the strongest voices for peace. I encourage you to continue on this path."

FARC leader Timoleon Jimenez spoke next. He took a conciliatory approach, pledging that the country's largest guerrilla group would lay down its arms for good.

In a much anticipated moment, the FARC leader formally apologized for all the violence the FARC may have caused during the conflict. "I would like to ask for forgiveness for all the pain that we may have caused during the war."

Jimenez called the agreement a victory for the entire Colombian people and the international community, adding that the FARC derived enormous satisfaction from the fact that the peace process in Colombia is a reference to finding solutions to conflicts anywhere else in the world.

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos also addressed those present. He said: "We have lived, we have suffered, for 52 years, an armed conflict between the sons of the same nation. Today, Colombia and the international community ... hail the peace agreement as the best news in a world rocked by war, conflict, intolerance and terrorism."

In a gesture to the FARC, Santos said that "as you begin your path of return to society, as you begin your transition to a political movement without weapons ... as head of state of a nation we all love, I welcome you to democracy."

The last step will be taken on October 2, when the Colombian people will vote on whether to accept the agreement or not. Recent opinion polls showed a large majority were in favor of it.

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