
Special report:
Colombia

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The promise of peace

Colombia is close to a historic peace agreement that will transform its prospects. But to realise its full potential, it will need to make big changes, argues Michael Reid

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LIKE MUCH ELSE in the Colombia of President Juan Manuel Santos, the ceremony on September 23rd started late, by an hour and 37 minutes. But it was worth waiting for. Negotiators from the government and the FARC guerrillas unveiled an agreement on the thorniest issue they had had to resolve: transitional justice, or what sort of penalties the perpetrators of crimes against humanity in Colombia's long armed conflict should face.



This breakthrough has opened the way to a swift conclusion of the peace talks in Cuba that began three years ago. Shortly before the ceremony in Havana Mr Santos had his first official meeting with Rodrigo Londoño, better known to Colombians as “Timochenko”, the FARC's top commander (this report will use the guerrillas' *noms de guerre*). The two pledged to sign a final agreement within six months, and the FARC undertook to start disarming within 60 days after that. Despite some subsequent bickering, these deadlines look plausible.

Mr Santos (pictured, left) was visibly uncomfortable when Raúl Castro, Cuba's president, encouraged him to shake hands with Timochenko in front of the cameras. Colombians see the FARC as narco-terrorists who bomb, kidnap and extort. Mr Santos knows that many of his countrymen will be angered by an agreement that will allow most FARC commanders to escape going to jail. But he also knows that peace represents a huge prize for Colombia. And because the FARC will be held to account for their crimes in the country's own courts, the agreement will offer a potential model for other conflict-ridden countries.

Mexico. In many ways it is exceptional. It claims to be Latin America's oldest democracy, with just one four-year military dictatorship in the 20th century. Geography put strong barriers in the way of its development: the Andes split into three chains there, with two long valleys between them; the country's Pacific coast is one of the wettest places on Earth; to the south-east, almost half the total area is made up of the *llanos* (remote tropical lowlands) and a corner of the Amazon rainforest. The state has never been able to control or integrate such difficult territory and its people developed a deep mistrust of strong government.

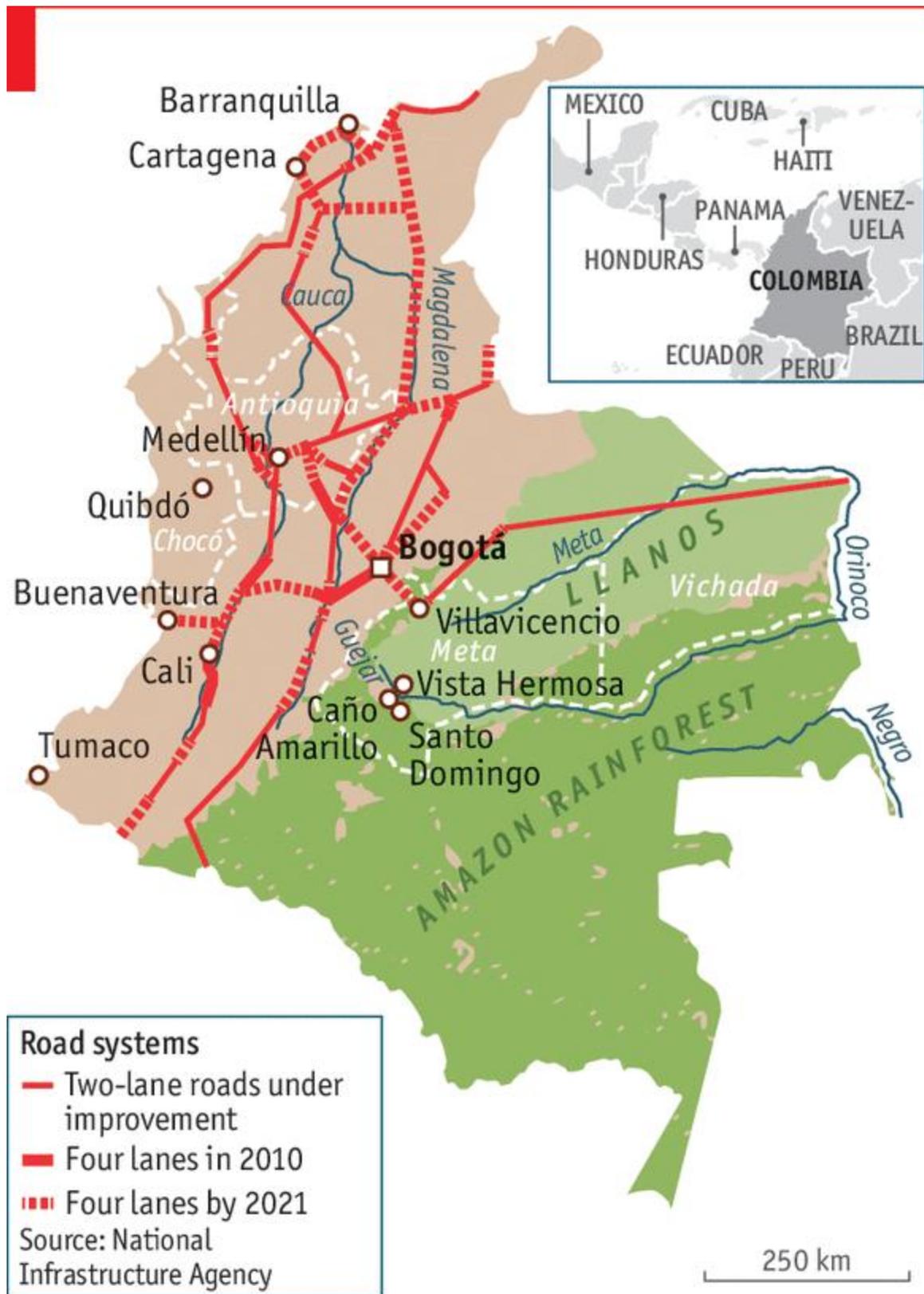
A reverence for the rule of law went hand in hand with lawlessness, unequal land ownership and a tradition of political violence and guerrilla warfare. For a century this pitted Liberal against Conservative politicians until they agreed to share power in 1956. The Cuban revolution and the cold war bred guerrilla movements of the left. The FARC was founded in 1964 by the Colombian Communist Party and the remnants of Liberal peasant guerrillas, to be followed a year later by the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN).

Colombia is exceptional, too, for its avoidance of populism. Its elites have favoured responsible economic policies. In the 50 years to 1995 the economy grew at a steady average of almost 5% a year, avoiding the Latin American ills of hyperinflation and debt default. A new constitution in 1991 dismantled power-sharing, deepened democracy and strengthened the courts.

Although several smaller guerrilla outfits made peace, the FARC and the ELN did not. They had taken to organised crime such as drug trafficking, kidnaps and extortion in the 1980s, and beleaguered landowners had responded by sponsoring right-wing paramilitary vigilante groups, with the complicity of some army officers. By the late 1990s Colombia was on the verge of becoming a failed state, with the world's highest murder rate and ten kidnappings a day. The government's writ extended to only half the country. The FARC had about 20,000 fighters and the ELN another 5,000. They attacked villages, engaged in urban terrorism, sowed landmines and recruited child soldiers. Their paramilitary foes massacred whole villages thought to sympathise with the guerrillas. The economy plunged into a deep recession, contracting by 4.5% in 1999. Several banks failed and unemployment climbed to over 20%.

In desperation, Colombians broke with their traditions of self-reliance, anti-militarism and moderate, consensual politics. Andrés Pastrana, who was president from 1998 to 2002, sought outside help. As part of a project called Plan Colombia, the United States provided the country with \$1.2 billion in 2000 and then around half that amount each year until 2006, mainly in military aid. The money was more than matched by a big increase in the government's own defence spending. In 2002 Colombians elected Álvaro Uribe, a cattle rancher from Antioquia. His father had been murdered by the FARC. An austere, intense figure, he campaigned on a platform of "democratic security". He increased the security forces by half and took the war to the FARC, killing several top commanders. At the same time he persuaded the paramilitaries to demobilise.

Mr
Uribe's
conquest
of the
FARC



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transformed Colombia, reducing the guerrillas from a deadly threat to the state to a tactical irritant. But there were stains on his record. His obsessive insistence on killing rebel fighters prompted some army units to murder civilians and pass them off as combatants killed in battle. Several of Mr

Uribe's aides and allies had links to the paramilitaries, and his government spied on senior judges and political opponents. He brought in a constitutional change so he could secure a second term, but his attempt to abolish terms limits and run again in 2010 was struck down by the Constitutional Court.

Mr Santos, who had been Mr Uribe's defence minister, got his predecessor's reluctant backing, but the two quickly fell out. Whereas Mr Santos is cool, patrician and managerial, Mr Uribe is volatile, a consummate politician who has a rapport with ordinary Colombians. Largely because of Mr Uribe's opposition, Mr Santos only narrowly won a second term last year.

This special report will celebrate Colombia's transformation over the past 15 years. But the job is only half done. To achieve lasting peace, the country needs to bring security, the rule of law and public services to rural areas, reform the justice system and restore political consensus. It must also open up the economy and internationalise a deeply introverted country. But first it must clinch the deal with the FARC.

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