

# **Cuba, the unifier, promotes peace in Colombia**

By Tom Whitney, June 27, 2016

The world is wracked by divisions. The United Nations does manifest unity, but otherwise jostling nations fill the landscape, oppressed peoples migrate toward oppression, racial groupings are at each other's throats, religious rivalries are legion, and social classes are divided.

Is there another way? Or, more precisely, do nations or peoples exist that, moving beyond everyday limitations, create unity in the cause of peace?

Pope Francis thinks there's at least one. On his way to Mexico for a five-day visit in February 2016, he stopped at the Jose Martí Airport in Havana. There, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, about to visit Latin American countries, was waiting. The two prelates talked and signed a 30-point statement on common purposes. This was the first high-level contact between these two Churches since the "Great Schism of 1054."

The meeting was over, and Pope Francis sought out Cuban President Raul Castro to say good-bye. "I don't want to leave," he said, "without expressing a sense of gratitude to Cuba, to the great Cuban People, and to their President, who is here." And, "If Cuba keeps on being so really available like this, it could become the capital of unity." President Castro assured Pope Francis that, "Cuba will continue supporting peace. And now the matter of Colombia remains."

In November 2012, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government began negotiations to end 52 years of war. The war has caused more than 200,000 Colombians to be killed and six million to be displaced from their land. Dissenting civilians often face violent repression, and 9000 political prisoners have accumulated.

The two sides looked to Cuba; the government there had arrangements in place by mid-2012 to host the talks, to provide facilities, hospitality, transportation, communications, and general support for the negotiating teams. Cuba, with Norway, has served as a "guarantor country" for the talks.

June 23 in Havana was a big day. The mood was both celebratory and serious as Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, FARC leader Timoleón Jiménez, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the presidents of six other nations, assorted diplomats, and "special envoys" all gathered for the signing of an important document.

Negotiators had been dealing with a predetermined five-point agenda. There would have to be agreements on all five for a final agreement to be possible.

They had already reached agreements on the first four items, and on June 22 they announced they had agreed on point five, "End of Conflict." The signing of that agreement the next day amidst much ceremony signified that a final accord was certain, that peace was on the way.

"End of Conflict" was about how to monitor and verify the giving up of arms by FARC combatants, how they would prepare for civilian life, and how they would be protected from attacks by paramilitaries.

The signing was a watershed moment. Leaders who addressed the gathering didn't stint on praise for the crucial role Cuba played in advancing the peace process. President Castro spoke of unity and peace.

"Peace will be victory for all Colombia, but also for all of 'Our America,'" he said. "The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) achieved, in its young history, the great milestone of proclaiming this region to be a Zone of Peace. The end of armed conflict in Colombia will be one more demonstration of the firm commitment of our peoples against the use of and threat of force and in favor of the peaceful resolution of controversies - Before differences, dialogue; before challenges, coordination. ("concertación")

"The achievement of peace in Colombia will also provide hope for millions of people on the planet. Their main worry continues to be survival in a world convulsed by violence and wars. Peace is no utopia. It's the legitimate right of every human being and all peoples."

Cuba works to bring people together. That's evident in its participation in Colombia's peace process and its fostering of alliances and cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean. Then too there is the work overseas performed by Cuban doctors and teachers and teaching by Cubans of vast numbers of the world's young people.

Veteran Cuba watcher Andres Gomez explained recently that Cubans are confident: life in the country plays out "calmly," and Cubans, "uniquely, are the owners of their destiny and that's because, against wind and tide, they are the absolute owners of their homeland."

He implies that Cubans know more about solidarity and collaboration than they do about the jostling and isolation that often characterize life in the industrialized world. Less driven by competing and less worried about basic survival, they perhaps enjoy the freedom to look beyond themselves, to reach out and act.

By contrast, many in the United States — ground zero for disunity and friction -- seem to shy away from big, collaborative projects. The New York Times apparently wasn't very interested, for one example, in the unity on display in Havana on June 23. Its report appeared the next day on page

eight in the form of three photos and a 51-word caption. Apparently not much about the story was "fit to print."