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## Peace agreement in Colombia. Fr De Roux: "Our aim is to foster reconciliation and ensure that there are no more barbarities"

"For the Truth Commission, the fifth anniversary of the Peace Accord in Colombia celebrates the hopes revived on November 24, 2016, which continue progressing despite difficulties and challenges." Jesuit Father **Francisco De Roux** is among the most prominent figures in Colombia today. Three years ago, he was appointed President of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, tasked with clarifying and making known the truth about what happened during more than half a century of conflict, focusing on the victims. Five years since the historic agreement between the government and the FARC guerrilla group was signed in Bogotá's Colón Theatre, in an exclusive report to SIR in Europe Father De Roux describes the arduous journey of the past years and future prospects, voicing the hope for a "greater peace" involving all interested parties, starting with the ELN guerrilla group. One thing is certain: "The barbarities Colombia has suffered, with 8,675,000 victims recorded in the national register of victims, and the dramatic toll of 82,000 missing persons, more than 2,000 massacres, more than 30,000 kidnappings, over 18,000 extra-judicial killings, more than 1,000 "false positive" murders, and over 25,000 casualties from anti-personnel mines, will never happen again. This madness must stop." **Initially, the signing of the peace accord had raised high hopes ...** The first year, 2017, was a festival of life. We saw FARC men and women descending the mountain with their weapons, holding white scarves and flowers, accompanied in a friendly manner by military and police officers. We later found them in places where they had been preparing for six months to surrender their weapons and switch to civilian life. We saw the leap of faith they made in society, as they left their guns behind forever. **But after that, something was shattered... Is Colombia still in a state of conflict?** The conflict cannot be said to be over. Nevertheless, the situation today is very different from the way it was in the years of conflict with the FARC guerrilla group, an impressive entity in its opposition to the State. For instance, the farms in the Antioquia Department were not accessible and kidnapping was common in the eastern part of the country. The capital Bogotá was surrounded by 12 fronts. One good news is that the war between the State and the FARC is over, which is why the large-scale massacres of 50 or more people have ended, kidnappings have decreased by 95%, forced displacements and land grabs from peasant farms have also decreased by 80%, while attacks on villages have virtually stopped. *Tragically, assassinations of social leaders did not cease, 20% of former guerrilla fighters rejoined the fighting, drug trafficking expanded, forest destruction increased and the areas left by the FARC were taken over by warfare and drug trafficking.* A particularly tragic event was the killing of some 300 men and women who had laid down their arms. The conflict has now taken on a less violent form, yet this requires a greater commitment to peace from Colombia, one that involves all its former violent formations. **What is the reaction to the suffering of millions of victims?** The task of the Truth Commission is not only to shed light on the suffering endured in the country during 50 years of domestic armed conflict. In fact its mission includes fostering reconciliation and non-recurrence. The Commission seeks to shed light on this suffering, such as the pain of the mother of a FARC guerrilla who died in the jungle during combat, or of a girl who was captured by the Guerrilla and eventually died, while her mother is struggling to recover her corpse. The grief of a guerrilla fighter is the same as the grief of a policeman's mother. **Who are the warlords today?** We need to understand the reasons why such a brutal war broke out among us Colombians... why we humiliated each other, why there were economic interests behind the conflict, why thousands of peasants were displaced to grab their land, why politicians crossed paths with the paramilitary and the guerrilla groups. The land problem has not been solved. In fact, some social leaders have died trying to recover land that belonged to the peasants. Some leaders have died because they were involved in coca eradication; some environmental activists have been severely affected by the conflict. *We hope that the efforts of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth will involve young people, social movements of peasants,*

*indigenous people, entrepreneurs and universities, so that it may also help the police and the army in carrying out in-depth cultural transformations, since security belongs to the people.* **Five years after the Havana Peace Agreement, do you agree with Archbishop Darío Monsalve of Cali that a new peace process is needed today?** The Truth Commission will certainly express this view, but I will give you my personal opinion. I think that Colombia should embark on a much deeper peace process, addressing what is happening, for example, with the FARC dissident group "Second Marquetalia", with the first Farc dissidents, with the ELN guerrilla army. And it must find a way of ensuring that the people involved in what is known as the drug trafficking gangs are brought to justice. Colombia has to resolve these situations and I don't think they can be solved simply by military means. We must move forward along the path of dialogue. **At the Truth Commission hearing of August 2021, Salvatore Mancuso Gomez failed to mention his connection with drug trafficking and with the Ndrangheta crime syndicate. What do you think about this connivance?** The Commission believes that some issues that have been discussed require further investigation, but we believe that we need to examine them in greater depth in order to explain them to the country. One of these issues, for example, is the relationship between drug trafficking and the paramilitary. Or between drug trafficking and guerrilla activity, which is a major drivers of continued violence. Many questions are still hanging in the explanatory part, and there is one in particular I insist upon, since Colombia is still left with the serious question raised by Commissioner Marta Ruiz concerning drug trafficking within the armed conflict and the involvement of drug trafficking already at the root of all that has happened. **Has Colombia already forgotten Pope Francis' visit in September 2017?** I very much appreciated the manner in which the Pope approached Colombia. It was enlightening. He realised that we were at odds with each other as a result of the political controversies and rose above that, always calling for peace. In his four-day visit, he devoted an entire day to visiting the victims and when he spoke to the bishops in Medellín he told them:

**do not expect to be able to drive Colombia away from where it is today through regulations or laws. Put your hands on the bloodstained bodies of your people, of the people who are suffering.**

The Commission focuses on that very point, on that reality. **Despite it all, are there signs of hope?** Colombia has been rocked by national protests over the last three years because people, especially young people, the indigenous people and Afro-Latin groups feel that their rights are being violated. The peaceful, large-scale protest has at times been marred by acts of vandalism perpetrated by infiltrators. Nevertheless, it shows that Colombia is shifting from armed combat, which caused widespread harm, to legitimate social struggles. And those rightful struggles must be respected, not brutally crushed. Despite all the difficulties, the situation in Colombia has improved. There is a growing passion for truth. An overwhelming majority rejects violence in all its forms; young people are increasingly participating on a daily basis and they show no interest in guerrilla groups, paramilitary forces or cocaine. And their battles also involve environmental protection. We hope that the 5th anniversary will mark a step towards "the great peace", that it may bring full implementation of the agreement along with renewed impetus in the efforts for the reconciliation of Colombians. *(in cooperation with Cristiano Morsolin)*

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