

**Peace, beyond a political agreement:
A Statement by the Bahá'í community of Colombia**

As our nation celebrates the signing of a peace agreement, the Bahá'í community of Colombia joins its compatriots in thanksgiving for this auspicious moment. The imagination stirs, the collective conscience finds ground for rejoicing, and the noble aspirations and hopes of our people are given a fresh impulse. The vocabulary of such a moment is invariably couched in poetic terms: to pass from darkness to light, from death to life, from the stillness of winter to the vibrancy of springtime. This is a singular moment of joy, healing and optimism, but also of somber reflection on the implications and demands of peace, on principles and concepts, on opportunities and risks. Beyond evoking such sentiments of joy, this development calls upon each individual and institution in our country to participate in a process that is nothing less than a new chapter in the collective experience of Colombia.

Like every new-born being, the next months and years bear within them both great possibilities and potential pitfalls. Our peace is, in a word, fragile. It demands a level of integrity to rise above polarized debate, to revert to higher principles to which all societies aspire, to that common ground that is the foundation of consensus. It is in this vein that we offer these thoughts.

So significant is this moment that we see it as an inflexion point in the history of the nation. The call for peace is not a call for the restoration of past norms and relationships. It signals the need for evolving patterns of thought and societal interactions that can bring our people together in a harmonious and prosperous society.

Envisioning a society not in armed conflict but in search of reconciliation, invites reflection on the very meaning of peace in a diverse country such as ours. How can peace benefit as many persons in Colombia as possible? “When the banner of truth is raised, peace becomes the cause of the welfare and advancement of the human world”, say Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, written early in the twentieth century when the world sat on the brink of the First World War. “In all cycles and ages war has been a factor of derangement and discomfort whereas peace and brotherhood have brought security and consideration of human interests.”¹

The very issue of truth is challenging, but one that needs to be confronted with courage and confidence in the outcome. It has been the foundation of efforts at societal reconciliation elsewhere in the world, and it should be at the core of the Colombian experience as well. Placing victims at the centre of peace talks – through whom the pain of conflict and its causes are inscribed on our consciousness – is a promising step in this direction. Yet the search for truth should be undertaken with the awareness that it needs to be accompanied by forgiveness. Calls for forgiveness are legitimate and necessary, but forgiveness requires honesty about what is being pardoned. Evils that have not been confronted may well corrode the process and subvert the good intentions of the majority. We should find the strength to recognize faults and forgive, and by that, invest in the hope that future generations of Colombians will not repeat the horrific experience of internal armed conflict.

¹ Foundations of World Unity- Universal Peace p. 20.

However, truth cannot be reduced to a formula. Truth is closely allied with knowledge. Truth requires a process of adjustment of perspectives and attitudes as knowledge of social realities unknown to others emerges through a mutual sharing of experience. Painful facts need to be confronted as segments of society who have never shared experiences or communicated now find themselves committed to a common goal of peace. New levels of unity are only possible as perspectives are expanded and harmonized and otherness yields to a collective awareness of our oneness. In declaring that we are “the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch”, Bahá’í Writings associate “unity” with “whatsoever leadeth to the decline of ignorance and the increase in knowledge”, and urge us to walk “in the shadow of justice and truthfulness”.² A genuine truth-seeking process may trigger the emergence of new sorts of relationships within society.

Of course, this discussion would be incomplete if it did not address the question of justice. Beyond the philosophical and technical debates on this question, is a principle to which we all aspire. In a sense, far from encouraging the punitive spirit that has often masqueraded under its name, justice is the practical expression of awareness that, in the achievement of human progress, the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked. Justice implies that, on the one hand, all Colombians benefit from the fruits of this prosperous society; and on the other, that they are able to participate in the shaping of its future.

No one doubts that the challenges of truth and forgiveness, of unity and justice, are considerable. The people of Colombia have suffered for many decades. Injustices are many and scars deep. However, Colombians have proven to be remarkably resilient, with an underlying optimism rooted in an instinctive spirituality. Faith, courage, hospitality and good will are part of the national character and have sustained the people through many years of difficulty. These same spiritual qualities are a vital resource upon which to draw in the current process of peace.

In its experience working with its fellow citizens to contribute to the betterment of society, the Colombian Baha’i community has witnessed these qualities, and we approach the peace process with every confidence in the inherent potential of the Colombian people to meet the challenge we now face. Colombia should draw upon these and other qualities implicit in its common tradition of values and spirituality. Among these values, integrity must characterize efforts in this new phase of Colombian history. Meeting the manifold commitments of the peace accord requires high integrity. The parties to the conflict must honour their word. They must prove that they are worthy of the trust of the people of Colombia. Trustworthiness is required at all levels of implementation. Trust lies at the heart of successful transitions and relations. It assures the tranquillity and security of a people. When the immediate signatories of the agreement demonstrate their integrity and mutual trust in honouring the accord, this in turn will gain the respect and support of the public and consolidate consensus around a plan for peace. The enthusiasm of the moment, bolstered by optimism and trust, should be channelled into concrete actions. Rarely was the phrase “let deeds, not words, be your adorning” more appropriate.³ A particular challenge will be to harness this energy and to open opportunities to the millions of motivated Colombians who stand ready to be a part of a broader peace process.

² Tabernacle of Unity, p. 9.

Few would dispute the merits of the principles highlighted above. Yet, we acknowledge that their implementation is neither straightforward nor facile. Critical to their realisation is the widespread, collective commitment of our people. All of us have the privilege and responsibility to ask ourselves what we can do to advance this historic process and how we can help one another to stay the course of peace. If some falter, others can arise with love and understanding to lift them up and help turn their gaze again toward the bright future we are building. This call for a collective commitment is not mere abstraction. It must find practical expression in the participation of all Colombians in the countless conversations of our society in the months ahead. This places responsibility on our leaders to provide opportunities for the whole citizenry to contribute to the shaping of our country's future. Equally important is our response, as citizens, to this historic opportunity, to generate and participate in conversations at all levels, from the home to the workplace to our schools and to our government—in every social space in which our future is shaped.

But beyond words, important as they are, participation may perhaps find its most powerful expression in deeds—in the flowering of countless acts of voluntary service across the country that imbue our society with a new spirit of hope for the future of Colombia. Let us look for opportunities to be of assistance to others, in ways, however humble, that lift our neighbour's burden, bring cheer to another heart, and show willingness to forego our own ease for the sake of others. Above all, let us look at the moral education of our children as our greatest responsibility, if we are to nurture the seeds of peace for the future.

This moment in the history of Colombia represents a call to all Colombians, men, women and children, of every social stratum and ethnicity. As we celebrate the arrival of peace to our country in the form of an accord between parties to a long-lasting armed conflict, let us commit ourselves to ensuring that an historic opportunity does not fritter away, that risks inherent in the transition are dispelled through mutual trust, so that this may be a rebirth of our Colombian nation. We offer prayers that “in furrows of pain, the good shall grow”. May future generations of Colombians look upon this current generation with a grateful sense that we did seize the moment and made sure that they would not suffer as we and generations before us have. The eyes of the world are on Colombia. May we arise to provide a model that will inspire and edify the hearts of our fellow human beings across the planet.