

FARC Backs Colombian President's Pledge to Abolish Military Draft



Havana, June 6 (NNN-RHC) -- The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group on Thursday welcomed a pledge by President Juan Manuel Santos to abolish mandatory military service if he is re-elected to a second term, and a peace deal is reached with the rebels.

"It's a very attractive offer, very important," FARC spokesman, Ricardo Tellez, said in Havana, Cuba, where the government and the rebels are holding peace talks. And he added: "We hope it's not just an election promise."

The Colombian president said Wednesday that if he is re-elected in a June 15th runoff and the peace talks lead to a successful disarmament, he will submit a bill to congress to abolish military conscription as a way to mark the end of the five-decade-old conflict between the armed forces and the leftist rebels.

Santos lost a first-round vote to his more conservative rival Oscar Ivan Zuluaga, a protege of former hardline president, Alvaro Uribe, who has steadfastly opposed negotiating with the rebels in favor of a strictly military strategy. Losing the runoff could spell the end of the peace process.

The peace talks began in November 2012, and have so far led to agreements in three key areas, including agrarian reform and political participation. The conflict has killed some 220,000 people and displaced 4.5 million.

Santos, who initiated peace talks with the FARC, the country's largest rebel group, in 2012 to end a decade-long conflict, is battling for re-election against Zuluaga of the Democratic Center Party.

Zuluaga won the first round of voting in May and a runoff is set to take place on June 15th. Zuluaga is a vehement opponent of the peace talks with the FARC, the centerpiece of Santos' presidency.

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