

# *Colombian President Santos Opens New Congress of Peace*

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Bogota, July 21 (Mercopress-RHC) -- Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos opened a new session of Congress on Sunday, calling on lawmakers to back government efforts to strike a peace deal with the FARC rebels to end 50 years of war.

"We have a great challenge -- an achievable challenge -- to end an armed conflict which has bled us for half a century, and build peace." This will be -- there's no doubt -- the Congress of peace," said Santos, who will be inaugurated for a second four-year term on August 7th.

Santos won re-election last month with support for his bid to bring an end to five decades of war with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, that has killed more than 200,000 people and displaced millions.

He will face fierce opposition in Congress, not least from ex-President Alvaro Uribe, a newly-minted senator and leader of the right-wing Democratic Center party. Uribe is a staunch opponent of the peace talks, which he says will lead to impunity for FARC leaders and are a betrayal of the war's victims.

Talks have so far produced partial agreements on three topics - land reform, political participation and drug trafficking. Negotiators in Havana are now discussing reparations and justice for victims of the conflict.

The FARC and the smaller rebel group the National Liberation Army, or ELN, who are in preliminary talks with the government, released a joint statement urging lawmakers to support peace.

The government will also seek congressional backing for reforms to taxation, pensions, healthcare and the justice system.

Colombia has one of the strongest economies in the region, with clear pro-business and foreign investment rules that have attracted billions of dollars to develop natural resources.

This has been accompanied by positive macro-economic indicators, including a balanced budget, but poverty and lack of quality jobs remains a major challenge.

Despite decades of guerrilla warfare, the country is also one of the most reliable partners of the U.S. and the EU in the region.

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