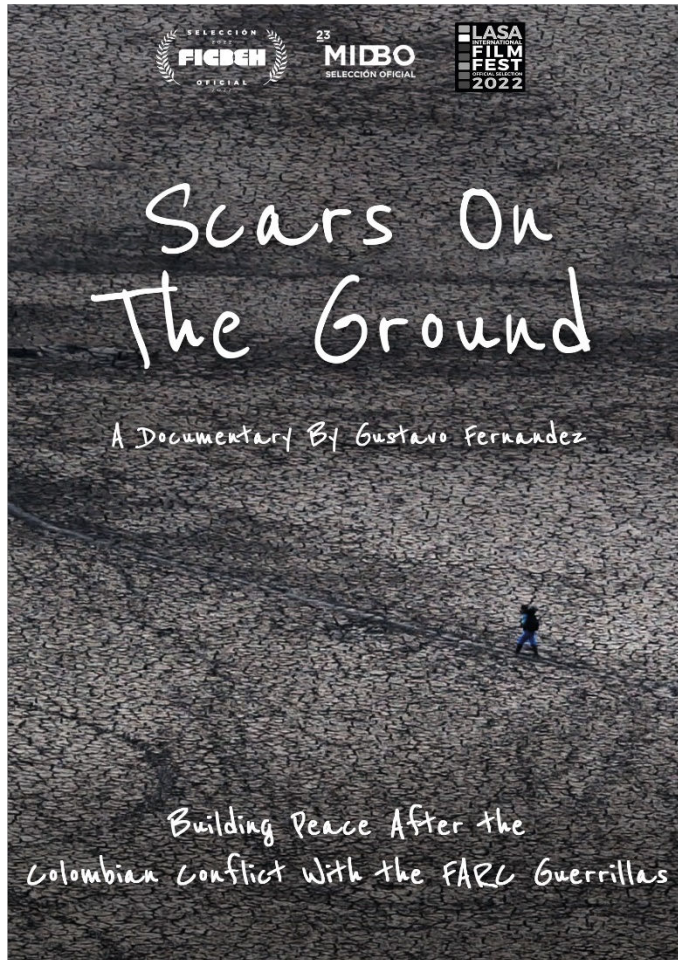




## SCARS ON THE GROUND / CICATRICES EN LA TIERRA



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## **Scars on the Ground**

In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the largest armed insurgent group in the country, the FARC. This peace agreement was a crucial step in ending a 70-year conflict that claimed over 250,000 lives. In "Scars on the Ground," Gustavo Fernández tells the stories of 4 former FARC combatants who laid down their arms in 2017 and reintegrated into a Colombian society weary of violence and war.

The 4 characters describe their journey from humble peasant origins to joining the FARC and their struggle to restore ties with their families, civil society, and the Colombian state. Each of them experiences both benefits and losses in their transition from war to peace and tries to make sense of what comes next in their new lives as civilians.

## **About Colombia**

Colombia is located in the northwestern corner of South America, with coasts on both oceans and great biodiversity, ranging from the world's largest high-altitude grasslands to tropical jungles, large savannas, and an abundance of water resources. It is bordered by Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador. The population of Colombia is about 53 million people, and its official language is Spanish. The country is a republic, governed by a president, a Senate, and a House of Representatives.

Colombia also has a history of intolerance and violence, marked by armed confrontations between different factions. Since the mid-twentieth century, factions of liberals and conservatives fiercely faced off until the Liberal Party and Conservative Party agreed to rotate power for four presidential terms. This conflict paved the way for the emergence of left-wing guerrillas, and later on, the anti-guerrilla struggle of the 60s and 70s. That struggle was further complicated by the beginnings of large-scale drug trafficking and led to the complex scenario of the early 21st century, marked by the rise of armed self-defense paramilitary groups that confronted insurgent groups.

One of the things that made all of this possible is a social situation marked by inequality. Many of Colombia's inhabitants say they live in the best country in the world, but half of its more than 50 million inhabitants live in poverty and do not have a formal job. Only with the 1991 Constitution, did the rights of ethnic minorities, such as Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples, begin to be recognized by the Colombian elite. However, these activities have not overcome widespread political violence. Economist Alejandro Gaviria asserts that Colombia's politicians have too often approached politics as a battlefield, with the result that there is ongoing conflict.

## **Creation of FARC**

From 1948 to 1958, Colombia went through a civil war between liberals and conservatives known as "La Violencia" ("The Violence"). When an agreement was finally signed between the elites of the two parties, a new government was established that was shared by them. These agreements excluded rural peasant communities—mostly small farmers—in favor of landowners. The peasants organized themselves but began to be repressed. A group of families took refuge in a mountainous

area in the center of the country called Marquetalia, and began to organize themselves politically and militarily under the leadership of Manuel Marulanda, known as "Tirofijo," who commanded the organization until his death in 2008.

In 1964, this group created the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, incorporating a Marxist-Leninist ideology that aimed to take over the state's power. To achieve this, they organized an army with a presence throughout most of Colombia. It had more than 20,000 fighters operating clandestinely, taking advantage of jungles and mountains. Many people from peasant families, and left-wing militants, were attracted to the group because it offered them a sense of community and a possible way out of poverty. In addition to training its members for combat, the FARC provided education and medical services.

### **The Survival of the FARC**

One of the reasons for the persistence of the FARC for nearly 60 years was the non-compliance of several peace agreements that had been made with the government, especially with that of President Belisario Betancur in the mid-1980s. The betrayal by the State led to the formation by the militants of the Patriotic Union political party of the FARC. The State began to systematically threaten, disappear and assassinate the militants, leading to more than 5,000 dead, displaced, and exiled.

The FARC responded to the terrorism condoned by the government, armed forces, and individuals with their own terrorism, kidnappings, sieges and takeovers of towns. Since the 1990s, the practice of extorting coca leaf and cocaine traffickers through the imposition of a notorious "gram tax" has been prevalent. The FARC decided to resort to extortion, kidnapping, and money from drug trafficking to finance their operations. In 1997, the US government included the FARC on its list of terrorist organizations. It was not removed from that list until 2021.

### **Peace Agreement**

The conflict between the FARC and the Colombian government continued until the 2016 peace agreement. Several attempts at peace negotiations before 2016 failed. Thanks to the commitment of the Santos government and the leadership of the FARC, an agreement was finally reached in 2016. However, in October of that year, a public referendum was held on the agreement, and 50.2% of voters rejected it.

The short pre-campaign for approval was marked by distortions and fake news by those who were pushing for the "no" vote. For instance, some people voted against the agreement because of a belief that by establishing special tribunals to try those who committed crimes during the conflict, individuals responsible for crimes against humanity would evade punishment. In contrast to this, point 5 of the "Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace" stated that those responsible for crimes against humanity such as kidnapping and recruitment of minors could face imprisonment.

After the referendum, the government made some changes to the agreement and presented it to Congress, where it was approved. Under the final peace agreement, FARC fighters would disarm in zones supervised by the United Nations and reintegrate into communities throughout Colombia. The FARC would thus become a political party. The Colombian government, for its part, would invest in rural development and create a transitional justice system (JEP) in order to find justice for the victims of the conflict. The JEP is a transitional justice tribunal to prosecute major perpetrators such as former FARC leaders, as well as military personnel who violated international humanitarian law and paramilitaries, for crimes against humanity committed during the war, such as kidnapping.

In 2016, the agreement was signed by the leader of the FARC, Rodrigo Londoño (also known as "Timochenko") and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, in the presence of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Under the peace agreement, FARC fighters were required to hand over their weapons within 180 days, in locations monitored by UN officials. It is estimated that between 7,000 and 8,000 weapons were handed over. However, after the signing of the peace agreement, the right-wing government that came to power in 2018 opposed the agreement and did not vigorously combat the paramilitary and drug trafficking groups that took over territories previously controlled by the FARC. More than 500 community leaders have been killed.

The peace agreement also included the creation of memorials to commemorate the end of the conflict. One of them is in Bogotá. Created in 2018 by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, "Fragments" is a memorial dedicated to the suffering of the numerous victims of the war. The "Anti-Monument" is a walkable installation of 1,500 square meters. The floor tiles are made of melted rifles that were handed over by FARC fighters. To create the monument, Salcedo hired women who had suffered physical and sexual abuse during the conflict, by all armed groups. In Gustavo Fernández's documentary, we see how this work was perceived by those who carried those rifles.

### **The Cause of Widespread Suffering**

The conflict with the FARC lasted half a century and caused widespread suffering throughout Colombia. According to the World Economic Forum, "It's Latin America's longest-running uprising."<sup>1</sup> During that time, hundreds of thousands of people died, tens of thousands disappeared, and millions were displaced by violence.

There were many children among FARC members. This has sparked widespread controversy. According to court magistrate Eduardo Frentes, "A provisional estimate, which could be even greater, of 18,667 boys and girls used in the conflict by the FARC is, without a single doubt, one of the most terrible acts that could have happened during the conflict."<sup>2</sup> The FARC argues that these children were not forced to join, but did so voluntarily, to escape poverty or obtain protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphanie Thomson, "It's the Last Armed Conflict in the Western Hemisphere. And It Could Be About to End," World Economic Forum, June 16, 2016. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/it-s-the-last-armed-conflict-in-the-western-hemisphere-and-it-could-be-about-to-end/#:~:text=It's%20Latin%20America's%20longest%20running,is%20coming%20to%20an%20end.>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Luis Jamie Acosta, "Over 18,000 Children Recruited by Colombia's FARC Rebels—Court," *Reuters*, August 10, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/over-18000-children-recruited-by-colombias-farc-rebels-court-2021-08-10/>

## The Situation Today

There is disagreement about the success of the peace agreement. Most people agree that the level of violence in Colombia has decreased. For example, in a 2021 article in the *Washington Post*, researchers write: “By a number of metrics, Colombia is safer today than before the negotiations began. Intentional homicides, battle-related deaths and conflict-related displacement have all declined since the peak of the conflict in the early 2000s. The country has also taken important steps toward documenting and punishing past violence. More than 13,000 individuals have gone before the special court established in the peace agreement, and the court has issued indictments against both FARC leaders and military officials.”<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of former FARC combatants handed over their weapons and only a few dissident groups have not complied. They remain in rebellion. However, a recognized leader of the guerrilla group, Iván Márquez, who was a negotiator of the peace agreement, returned to the jungle due to noncompliance by the Uribe government and courts setup by the prosecutor's office. The administration of Iván Duque, in fact, was elected on the promise of "shredding" the peace agreement. During his government, there was a systematic attempt to discredit—and even dismantle—the institutions responsible for implementing the agreement.

The peace agreement has many criticisms. One of the biggest is that, although violence in Colombia has been reduced, it remains a significant problem. In recent years, more than 300 former FARC guerrillas have been killed, in what, according to official reports, were reprisals or revenge killings. There has also been violence by drug traffickers or other gangs fighting for control of areas that were previously controlled by the guerrillas. Human Rights Watch says, “Conflict-related violence has since taken new forms.” According to its most recent report, “[In 2021] civilians in various parts of the country suffered serious abuses at the hands of National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas, FARC dissidents, and paramilitary successor groups. Human rights defenders, journalists, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, and other community activists face pervasive death threats and violence. The government has taken insufficient and inadequate steps to protect them.”<sup>4</sup>

Another criticism is that the implementation of the agreement has been slow. According to a 2021 report by the United Nations Secretary-General, “At the current pace, it is estimated that implementation of the Final Agreement would take 26 years, as opposed to 15 years as originally planned.”<sup>5</sup> Many rural communities argue that the government has not fulfilled its obligations under the treaty to invest in rural development.

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriella Levy, Juan Tellez, and Mateo Villamizar-Chaparro, “Five Years After Colombia’s Peace Deal, the FARC Is no Longer on U.S. Terrorist Group Lists,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/02/five-years-after-colombias-peace-deal-farc-is-no-longer-us-terror-group-lists/>

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Colombia: Events of 2021,” 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/colombia>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General, “United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia,” September 24, 2021. <https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/n2125243.pdf>

## Additional Resources

### Books

- Robert A. Karl, *Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.
- Alfredo Molano, *On the Back of a Mule: Trips to the Heart of the FARC*. Bogotá, Colombia: Aguilar, 2016.
- Juan Manuel Santos, *The Battle for Peace: The Long Road to End the Conflict with the Oldest Guerrilla in the World*. Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Planeta Colombiana, 2019.
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