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Colombia's President Traveling to Cuba to Promote Peace

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Colombia has been abuzz in recent hours with speculation that the government and negotiators for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia have reached a tentative agreement on the thorny issue of how to punish rebel commanders for human rights abuses.

If confirmed, it would represent a major breakthrough in the talks and remove the last significant obstacle to a final deal to end a half-century of bloody, drug-fueled fighting. It comes after Pope Francis in a visit to the communist island this week warned both sides that they didn't have the right to fail in this their best chance at peace in decades.

As part of talks in Cuba stretching over more than two years, both sides had already agreed on plans for land reform, political participation for guerrillas who lay down their weapons and how to jointly combat drug trafficking. Further cementing expectations of a deal, the FARC in July declared a unilateral cease fire and are working with Colombia's military on a program to remove tens of thousands of rebel-planted land mines.

But amid the slow, but steady progress one issue seemed almost insurmountable: How to punish FARC commanders for human rights abuses in light of stricter international conventions to which Colombia is a signatory and almost unanimous public rejection of the rebels.

The FARC, whose troops have thinned to an estimated 6,400 from a peak of 21,000 in 2002, have long insisted they aren't abandoning the battlefield only to be treated as criminals. They say that they would only consent to prison time if leaders of Colombia's military, which has a

litany of war crimes to its name, and the nation's political elite are locked up as well.

On Tuesday, Santos dispatched his negotiating team to Cuba almost a week ahead of the next scheduled round of talks and then further fueled speculation of an imminent breakthrough by announcing on Twitter he would stop in Havana en route to New York, where he's scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly on Friday.

It's the first official visit by Santos to the negotiations. He was expected to be joined at an event with the FARC's top military commander Rodrigo Londono, better known by his alias Timochenko, according to a source close to the talks who requested anonymity due to lack of authorization to discuss details publicly.

"Some people on both sides will be unhappy. Some want more peace, others want more justice," Santos said in a speech Tuesday hinting at the advances. "Not everyone in the world will be content, but I'm sure in the long run we'll be much better off."

The government has gone to great lengths to insist that its framework for so-called transitional justice doesn't represent impunity for guerrilla crimes such as the kidnapping of civilians, forced recruitment of child soldiers and heavy involvement in drug trafficking, for which the FARC's top leadership has been indicted in the U.S.

But even before details have become known, conservative critics lashed out at what they said was excessive lenience on the part of the government.

"Santos, it's not peace that's near, it's the surrender to the FARC and the tyranny of Venezuela," former President Alvaro Uribe, whose military offensive last decade winnowed the FARC's ranks and pushed its leaders to the negotiating table, said in a message on Twitter. "Without jail time for the commanders, there will be a deal in Havana but also a recipe for more violence in Colombia."

With the sticky issue of transitional justice apparently resolved, negotiators must still come up with a mechanism for rebels to demobilize, hand over their weapons and provide reparations to their victims. Santos has also promised he'll give Colombians the chance to ratify any deal, which must also clear the nation's Congress.

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