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LOCAL // HOUSTON

# For local Colombians, peace treaty inspires conflicting emotions



Sebastian Herrera, Houston Chronicle

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Martin Alonso Aragón is one of the approximately 24,000 Colombian natives who live in the Houston Area. Colombian citizens will vote on Sunday, Oct. 2, 2016 on whether to ratify a peace treaty between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest guerrilla group in the country. The two sides have been at war for more than 50 years. Jeremy Carter/Houston Chronicle

When guerillas finally tugged the blindfold off his eyes, Martin Alonso Aragón was handed a bottle of raw milk. Aragón hates milk, but he chugged it anyway.

Aragón had been marched up a mountain on foot for seven hours, taken somewhere into the jungle near Cali, Colombia.

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That afternoon, he and his "Noticiero de las 7" news cameraman had been stopped on their way out of a crime scene. Aragón had been there to cover a deadly ambush on police, and he had asked one question too many for the National Liberation Army (ELN), an insurgent guerilla group.

"I slept on the ground," said Aragón, a 50-year-old now living in Katy. "I thought they were going to kill me."

On that March day in 1993, Aragón became one of the thousands of victims in Colombia's guerilla wars, which have spanned more than half a century.

Now, Colombia stands at a crossroads. A public referendum on Sunday will decide the fate of a recently signed peace treaty between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest and most influential guerilla group. FARC is on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations, known for Marxism, urban kidnappings, slayings and the drug trade.

The clashes with FARC have taken some 220,000 lives, displaced about 7 million people and devastated the country's economy.

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Some Colombians believe that the accord gives too much forgiveness and power to FARC, while others exhausted from the war are desperate for it to end.

"This is significant," said Lina Del Castillo, a University of Texas Latin America professor who has studied Colombian history. "The fact that they've reached a peace agreement is unprecedented. It's unprecedented how long the war has gone on. There's also questions that remain - a lot of questions of what this will mean for the future."

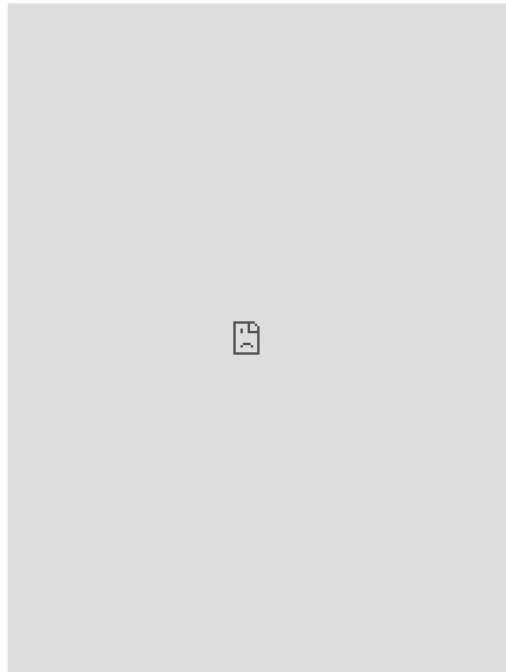
Aragón said he longs for peace, "but peace cannot be signed with criminals. This only gets better with a better government, with no corruption - when there are equal rights and inclusion."

The Houston area is home to approximately 24,000 Colombians, the fourth-largest Colombian population in the country. Nearly 1 million Colombians and their families live in America, the greatest source of South American immigrants to the U.S.

Approximately 45,000 Colombian citizens like Aragón are living here as refugees, according to a 2015 report by the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

The MPI report says that significant Colombian migration began in the 1950s as a result of armed conflict and economic instability. Most Colombian immigrants arrived in the U.S. in the 1980s and 90s, the time frame that coincides with one of the country's most violent eras.

### Harris County's South American Foreign-Born Residents



**Caption:** More Colombians migrate to Houston area more than any other South American country. Colombians began migrating heavily to the U.S. more than 50 years ago partially as a result of armed conflicts and political instability in their home country. The Houston area holds the fourth-largest Colombian population in the U.S., with the top three cities being New York, Miami and Orlando. *Explore the map by clicking on each country to see how many South American immigrants are estimated to live in Harris County. Click the button above the map to discover how the Colombian population — and other foreign-born South American*

Aragón applied for political asylum days after arriving in Miami in 1999.

He endured more than a month under ELN control during his 1993 captivity.

Aragón traveled by mule with the group each day. He was rarely allowed to bathe, and two fighters watched him at all times. He was sure he would never regain his freedom.

Then one day, without explanation, he was driven back into Cali. They parked at Estadio Olímpico Pascual Guerrero during a soccer match and opened the car door. Aragón was free.

Six years later, Aragón covered the ELN's infamous capture of hundreds of civilians inside a church near Cali. The group, who had his phone number, sent him death threats. He went into hiding and eventually succumbed to friends' pleas for him to leave the country.

Aragón came to Houston in 2012 after spending years in Florida and South Carolina working various jobs in the construction, service and media industries. He moved to Katy soon after with his wife and two daughters, and he now operates a limo service.

Aragón's country is not the same one he left. It remains a world's leader of cocaine production, but its homicide and kidnapping rates have dropped dramatically over the last 14 years, while its economy has improved.

As Colombia has grown safer, it has sought to increase tourism by selling its mountainous beauty, rich Latin American culture and warm people. For years, it has advertised the same tourism banner: "The only risk is wanting to stay."

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has staked his legacy to the peace talks.

"Many of us are unsure about what the future brings," said Liliana González, an owner of the Gran Colombia restaurant in the Energy Corridor area who emigrated from Colombia 15 years ago. "I've heard people eating at my restaurant speaking on both sides of the matter - those who are on the 'yes' side (of the treaty), and those who are on the 'no' side. It's been dominating the lunch talk. We all have family in Colombia. Some of us still have properties there. We don't stop being Colombians just because we're here."

Gran Colombia is one of several Colombian restaurants in the area, with most of them concentrated in west Houston.

Ruben Albarracin sat at the restaurant bar on a recent weekday afternoon and enjoyed a plate of roasted chicken, plantains and rice. Albarracin fled Colombia with his wife and two children 20 years ago after he received threats from guerilla members in Cali.

"This is a difficult subject," he said. "But how I see it is in a practical way."

Albarracin said there are many things he doesn't like about the treaty, but he does not want to see continued bloodshed.

"This isn't going to mean true peace, but this will mean the end of violence between the FARC and government," he said. "It's a good opportunity for my country. I believe in trying."



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Martin Alonso Aragón  
Sebastian Herrera/Jeremy Carter/Houston Chronicle

Those who have lived in fear or seen bloodshed firsthand; who have had to bury a son or daughter, have vested interests in seeing the war end, according to Bruce Bagley, a University of Miami professor who has studied the country for 40 years and published works on American drug trafficking and security.

"I am convinced that this is by far the best route for Colombia," Bagley said. "If it is not implemented, then Colombia is going to be mired in the same syndrome that has so severely hurt the country in the past 50 years."

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The 297-page peace accord requires the roughly 7,000 FARC fighters to hand in their weapons to a United Nations commission and to withdraw from the drug trade.

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UT professor Del Castillo said the war could be compared to America's own civil war. As in the U.S., generations to come will be culturally and socially shaped, she said, by the war and treaty's outcome.

A successful deal with FARC will not mean the end of strife in Colombia. The nation is still threatened by the drug trade, right-wing paramilitary and leftist guerrilla groups such as ELN, which also is in peace talks with the government.

But harmony with FARC would be a breakthrough, Del Castillo said.

Colombian citizens living in the U.S. can participate in the referendum if they were registered voters as of the last Colombian presidential election in 2014, Colombian Embassy Press Secretary Olga Acosta said. Voters can check [www.registraduria.gov.co](http://www.registraduria.gov.co) to see where and how to vote, or by visiting the Colombian consulate in Houston's Galleria area.

Aragón will vote "no" and anxiously await results.

Aragón and his family plan to permanently return to Colombia next year - regardless of how the vote turns out. They could come back to the U.S., he said, if his country destabilizes again.

He misses the incomparable taste of Colombian fruit drinks. He misses his job as a journalist and being among his people and language.

He'll never get over missing his mother's funeral in 2006 and his father's in 2011, when he was still too afraid to return.

"Our lives completely changed when we left," Aragón said. "Our professions stopped. In Colombia, we were very connected, and our careers were growing. Here, we are only enduring - working, eating, paying rent.

"I am not afraid to go back now because I know the ELN commanders that were there when I left are no longer there."

The family's move to the U.S. and from state to state has made it difficult to hold onto objects from their country.

The little they have lays inside a black leather portfolio kept on a shelf in the master bedroom closet.

One photo shows a young Aragón and his wife inside a church holding their daughter Laura at her baptism in 1994. Another picture is of the three again, this time standing on a street years later in the coastal city of Cartagena.

A different photo - one of Aragón's most treasured - depicts a smiling Aragón resting his head on his father's left shoulder and holding onto his left arm as the two walked together on Aragón's 1993 wedding day. Photos also show

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the two men together on Aragón's 1999 wedding day. Photos also show Aragón during his TV station job, at large family gatherings and in the company of friends.

Aragón doesn't look at the pictures much. It's often too emotional. But recently, he and his family opened the portfolio to reminisce.

Aragón shared his stories of Colombia with his children. They all had heard many of the tales before, he said, but it felt good to be back, for a moment, in the nation he adores.

"I know I will make more memories there soon," he said. "I can't wait to do so."



Sebastian Herrera/Houston Chronicle / Jeremy Carter

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Sebastian Herrera mostly covers west Houston and Katy suburban news for the Houston Chronicle. He is a journalism graduate from the University of Texas at Austin, and his previous work includes the Austin American-Statesman, NPR's Austin affiliate KUT Public Media and ESPN The Magazine.

VIEW COMMENTS



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BY AMBER ELLIOTT

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