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New Colombian cardinal has worked to help end country's civil war

by Ezra Fieser by Catholic News Service

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic — In naming Colombian Archbishop Ruben Salazar Gomez a cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI recognized the work of an outspoken advocate for a peaceful resolution to Colombia's civil war, one of the world's longest-running conflicts.

The pope announced Wednesday that on Nov. 24, he would create six new cardinals, including the 70-year-old archbishop of Bogota, currently president of the Colombian bishops' conference.

The Nov. 24 consistory will come just more than a week after the Colombian government and rebels are scheduled to begin talks aimed at bringing the South American country's decades-old war to an end.

The war, which began in 1964 and has pitted guerrilla armies against government forces, has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. Resolving it peacefully has become one of Cardinal-designate Salazar's goals in his decades of church work.

He has repeatedly called for a peaceful resolution, telling Catholic News Service earlier in October that, "As church, we have always said that the armed conflict in Colombia must end through dialogue and consensus in order to achieve true and lasting peace."

Salazar was traveling Wednesday and not available for comment, but church leaders who have worked closely with him praised the pope's announcement.

"I'm very glad. This was a recognition of the church's work in Colombia at a very difficult moment, a challenging moment, in the country," said Bishop Nel Beltran Santamaria of Sincelejo.

Beltran told Catholic News Service that Salazar can almost seem "timid," but that masks the more complex character of a man who works tirelessly and is passionate.

"He's the kind of unique individual that is able to earn the respect of everyone, thanks mostly to his hard work," said Beltran said.

Those who have worked alongside him describe him as a hard-working mediator who has been able to gain the respect of opposing forces in the country.

"He's very serious, very executive in his approach," said Fr. Dario Echeverri Gonzalez, secretary of the National Conciliation Commission, an independent church entity that works toward a solution to the war. "He's very intelligent and able to take a position without making enemies."

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"This is also an indication of the Vatican's political support for the peace process that the church has supported in Colombia," Echeverri said.

The church helped mediate in previous rounds of negotiations but as of yet does not have a formal role in November talks.

Gerard Powers, professor of the practice of Catholic peace-building at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, said the announcement of the new cardinal sends a clear message of support.

"It's a strong recognition of the role (Salazar) has played in promoting a just peace in Colombia as well as the role of the Catholic Church in finding a lasting solution to a conflict that has lasted five decades," he said.

Born in Bogota Sept. 22, 1942, Salazar has spent most of his adult life working in war-torn Colombia. He was ordained as a priest in 1967 and worked throughout the country, rising to prominent roles in the Colombian bishops' conference and later to archbishop of Barranquilla. In 2010, he was appointed archbishop of Bogota.

Since 2011, he has served as first vice president of the Latin American bishops' council, known by its Spanish acronym as CELAM.

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