

**Recollections of Leading World Figures By Daisaku Ikeda  
César Gaviria Trujillo and Ana Milena Muñoz de Gaviria, Former  
President and First Lady of Colombia—Leaders of a New Generation**

I WAS in Miami when I received a message from the office of the president of the Republic of Colombia: “Will SGI President Ikeda be going ahead with his visit to Colombia?” This was immediately before my scheduled visit to the South American country in early February 1993, and just after there had been a large terrorist bomb blast in the capital, Santa Fe de Bogotá.

The last part of January had seen a succession of terrorist acts instigated by one of Colombia’s powerful drug cartels. While government buildings and facilities had frequently been targeted in the past, this latest blast killed and injured many innocent civilians. The terrorist attack was widely reported on U.S. television and around the world.

A scheduled international conference in the Colombian capital had to be canceled after its overseas participants pulled out one after another, fearing for their lives. Some reporters even left Colombia because they felt it was just too dangerous to remain.

The main purpose of my planned visit to the country was to attend the opening of the “Eternal Treasures of Japan” exhibition at the Colombian National Museum. [The exhibition featured works of art on loan from the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum and was scheduled to open on February 8, 1993].

As a matter of fact, at the early planning stages of this project, some in Japan voiced fears about the safety of the 120-or-so works of art that would be loaned to the South American museum. That was, in some ways, a very practical concern. But I had a different viewpoint. The exhibition, I felt, was a sign of our friendship with Colombia. Friendship is irreplaceable; it is more important than the most valuable material objects. Whatever difficulties there might be, I wanted to act in good faith. That, I insisted, is the true meaning of culture.

Earlier, Colombia had loaned some 500 priceless national treasures, including a 1,700-carat uncut emerald shown outside of Colombia for the first time, for the “Great Cultural Exhibition of Colombia” [held at the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum in 1990]. The “Eternal Treasures of Japan” exhibition was conceived in part, as an expression of gratitude and reciprocity. I was firmly convinced of the importance of holding the exhibition at this time, and preparations thus went ahead.

It is important to repay sincerity with even greater sincerity, and friendship with friendship when it is needed most. This is even more true in the realm of cultural exchange, which is an endeavor of the spirit.

From Miami, I informed the office of the Colombian president that I intended to visit the South American country exactly as scheduled, adding that I would exert myself as a courageous fellow Colombian.

### **Visiting Colombia**

SANTA Fe de Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, is 2,600 meters above sea level.

“How close the airport seems to the sky,” I said softly. I remembered a night more than thirty years ago. On my first visit to South America [in October 1960], the plane stopped at Colombia’s El Dorado International Airport to refuel. Bright constellations filled the night sky. I vividly recalled the silver stars and their shimmering silver light.

Two days after my arrival in Colombia in February 1993, I paid an official visit to the House of Nariño, the presidential building [on February 8]. Colombian President César Gaviria Trujillo and First Lady Ana Milena Muñoz de Gaviria welcomed me with smiles. This was my second meeting with Mrs. Gaviria, as we had met earlier in Tokyo [in May 1992]. I was deeply aware and appreciative of the great efforts undertaken by the president and the first lady to make me feel welcome in their country from the moment of my arrival.

At the time, Mr. Gaviria was said to be one of three heads of state in the world who were still only in their 40s. He assumed the office of Colombian president, which has been reputed to be one of the most dangerous jobs in the world, when he was 43. Youth and aspiration emanated from his resolute presence. The Nobel Prize-winning Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez called President Gaviria a symbol of the change in political generations.

### **The Success of a Policy of Openness**

AS we talked, Mr. Gaviria remarked that he would like the leaders, people and intellectuals of Japan to understand that Colombia is a land of great variety and diversity. It is unfair and unbalanced to think of the country solely in terms of the drug problem.

Soon after beginning his term in office [in 1990], President Gaviria made sweeping revisions to the country’s laws so that more Colombians could participate in the government of their country. He promoted a policy of openness, liberalizing trade, privatizing national industries and inviting foreign investment. As a result, Colombia achieved the most stable economic growth of all Latin American countries. Mr. Gaviria proudly noted that while other countries in Latin America were having difficulties paying back their international loans, Colombia’s payments were on schedule, and the nation’s per capita income was also rising. The president spoke with an urgent wish that the Japanese know the truth about his country.

### **Viewing Others With Goodwill**

ADMIRING the intensity of his commitment, I said: “Every country has its problems. No nation, no group, is completely without them. There can be no mutual understanding, and no peace, as long as we focus on those facets alone and regard them as the total picture. Instead of looking only at the surface, we need to stand in the other person’s shoes and confirm things with our own eyes. We need to have a perspective and actions that begin with the question: ‘What can we do to make the most of Colombia’s rich potential?’ Especially in an age of increasing

globalization, concrete efforts to improve mutual understanding are needed.”

The same is true of relations between individuals. We do not always apprehend the truth about a person by taking a cool, objective view. In fact, in many cases, the quickest way to getting to know another person is to interact with him or her in a spirit of warm goodwill.

### **Standing on the Side of the Weak**

WHEN Mr. Gaviria was still young, his father died, leaving him to shoulder the responsibility of being head of his family. He also became president of Colombia after the leading presidential candidate was struck down by an assassin’s bullet; being hastily nominated as his replacement in the election campaign.

I also assumed heavy responsibilities while still young, so I empathize with the great trials and hardships this young pillar of the Colombian nation no doubt has had to endure. In an interview, Mr. Gaviria once remarked that it pained him deeply to have to spend so much of his time and energy on fighting against violence, injustice and the drug trade. Why? Because the time and resources consumed in this battle could be relocated to the problems of the weakest in society—especially children—who should be the main concern of a nation’s president. He voiced his hope that the problem of violence could be solved, so that the president of Colombia could devote more time to helping society’s weak and disadvantaged.

Mrs. Gaviria shares her husband’s strong convictions. Declaring children to be the nation’s top priority, she has sponsored a music program for underprivileged children and youth from the ages of 5 to 25. During our meeting at the Nagano Training Center in Japan in August 1993, she informed me that more than 3,000 young people participate in the program, which has grown to include seventeen orchestras, sixty-three music groups, and twenty-two choral groups. She also described what a moving sight it had been to behold young people, who had never before held a musical instrument in their hands and who had been deprived of opportunities for education and self-development, giving beautiful musical performances at the presidential house.

When I first met Mrs. Gaviria in May 1992, I was impressed by how strongly she believed in the power of culture. She shared her belief that culture develops and improves people, and has the power to put an end to violence.

### **Developing Mutual Understanding**

FORTUNATELY, the Colombian showing of the “Eternal Treasures of Japan” exhibition, which owes much to Mrs. Gaviria’s generous support and efforts as honorary president of the exhibit’s steering committee, was a great success. It was the first full-fledged exhibition of Japanese art shown in Colombia since the country was founded. Until then, the image of Japan was that of a country of technology and karate, and some Colombians didn’t even know where Japan was located on the map. The exhibition gave many their first encounter with the spirit

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of the “land of cherry blossoms.” In their excitement, the people of the “land of the orchid,” as Colombia is known, clamored for a second exhibition of Japanese art, and this summer “The Spirit and Beauty of Japan” exhibition [also co-sponsored by the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum] was held. This made me very happy. At last two neighbors bound together by the Pacific Ocean had begun to understand and know each other a little better.

Nothing can be accomplished without such heart-to-heart communication. If we don’t understand each other’s hearts, what do we understand?

In February this year, Mr. and Mrs. Gaviria visited Soka University. The Colombian president’s speech on that occasion made a deep impression on the young minds of the students. He stated his conviction that politics is the art of making the impossible possible. What kind of a world would it be, he asked, without people possessed of ideals and vision who dedicate their vital energies to working for something that seems impossible? He also acknowledged my efforts in the cause of peace, dating back long before the end of the Cold War, when peace still seemed an improbable goal. It is his firm belief that peace and the eradication of poverty are indeed achievable.

He also noted that during the Cold War, there was no end to external resources available to developing nations to keep wars going. But now that the Cold War is over, he said, the international community is sidestepping its responsibility to provide these same nations with aid to support democracy and eliminate poverty. We must not forget the poor, he insisted. Mr. Gaviria’s words ring with painful truth.

### **The World’s Problems Are Our Problems**

HERE is a youthful leader who risks his life to fight for the people. Poverty and violence are problems for the entire human race. They are not other people’s problems; they concern us all. People are suffering here and now, in our world, in our time.

We might say that Mr. and Mrs. Gaviria represent the entire human race as they continue to struggle against great odds in Colombia. If we Japanese consider ourselves global citizens, then surely we should offer them our deepest appreciation and respect for their courageous efforts and fight alongside them. I am deeply concerned about the fact that Japan is regarded as one of the most spiritually impoverished nations that cares only for its own short-term profit.

After Mr. Gaviria’s term as Colombian president ended this summer, he became secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS). There are high hopes for this leader of a new era in Latin America.

### **True Leaders Give People Hope**

FIDEL Duque Ramirez, former Colombian ambassador to Japan, once said to me that the lack of true leaders was one of the biggest problems the world faced. Leaders, he said, are those who can generate hope. In a world shrouded in

darkness and lacking direction, they bring light and point the way forward.

A “way forward” can only be blazed through one’s own actions, while “light” is created by one’s own burning commitment.

Having formed this friendship with Colombia, I am determined to devote myself to the prosperity and happiness of that country for the rest of my life, counting myself as a compatriot of the courageous Colombian people. □

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