

FARC wants meeting with pope during Cuba visit

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Colombia's Marxist FARC rebels, now negotiating a peace deal in Havana, said Sunday they hope to meet with Pope Francis on his upcoming Cuba visit.

Pope Francis will visit Cuba September 19 to 22 as part of a tour that will later take him to the United States.

"We would like to do that. It would be something amazing," the rebels' spokesman "Ivan Marquez" said ahead of a break in the talks, which resume August 17.

"Just imagine the impact it would have to get Pope Francis' support for this major joint effort for all Colombians — to achieve reconciliation after decades of conflict," he added.

Asked if any request had formally been made to the Vatican, Marquez said he was "talking about something we aspire to do."

Colombia is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic.

And the pope — a native of Argentina and first pontiff to hail from Latin America — has a keen interest in issues related to poverty, Cuban emigrant, refugees and political prisoners.

Francis is also known to have played a key role in nudging the United States and Cuba toward reconciliation late last year, ending decades of estrangement dating back to the Cold War.

Colombia's stop-start peace talks, ongoing since November 2012, have made progress on some important points but lack a final agreement.

The war in Colombia has left an estimated 260,000 dead and forced more than six million people from their homes.