
Costa Rica's Peace Story

- Juan Vásquez de Coronado, who colonized Costa Rica in 1562, brought an attitude distinct from that of most conquistadors: he believed in treating the native inhabitants with respect and used force only as a last resort.
- Costa Rica took its first step as a peace leader by abolishing the death penalty in 1871. Then-President Tomás Guardia initiated this action at the urging of his wife on their 25th wedding anniversary.
- The year 1948 was the major turning point toward peace in the history of Costa Rica. After a 44-day civil war, José Figueres became the provisional president (chief of a de facto joint government) and was instrumental in writing Costa Rica's new constitution. In it, he abolished the army, making Costa Rica the first country in the world to do so. The new constitution also established free elections, guaranteed public education, gave women the right to vote, and granted full citizenship to the Afro-Caribbean population. The constitution also provided citizen rights that were ahead of their time, including a progressive labor code, a system of social security and a set of social guarantees. This strong peace-based constitution provided a stable and just foundation for Costa Rican society, which helped the country avoid the violence that has plagued other Central American countries. These factors resulted in Costa Rica becoming one of the most democratic and prosperous countries in Latin America.
- In the 1980s when Nicaragua was engaged in civil war, Costa Rica was pressured by the United States to let Americans build military bases for the Contras, a guerilla group trained and armed by the CIA. To escape this pressure, President Luis Alberto Monge declared that it was the policy of Costa Rica to remain neutral in international conflicts. This policy was formally adopted as Article 7 of the constitution in November 1983.
- In another gesture that demonstrated Costa Rica's devotion to peace, in 1980 President Rodrigo Carazo facilitated the donation of Costa Rican land to found the United Nations University for Peace, approved by the 35th General Assembly of the UN. The mission of the university (UPeace) is to "provide humanity with an international institution of higher education for peace with the aims of promoting among all human beings a spirit of understanding, lessening threats to world peace and progress, and keeping with the noble aspirations proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations."
- President Carazo also proposed a UN resolution for an International Day of Peace to be celebrated as a global ceasefire on the opening day of the UN session each year. This resolution was passed in 1981. Then in 2001, a new resolution was proposed by the United Kingdom and Costa Rica, resetting the date to September

21st each year. The resolution passed unanimously and this International Day of Peace is now celebrated around the world.

- In 1986, Oscar Arias became President of Costa Rica at a time marked by intense conflict and civil war in Central America. Under his leadership, the five Central American presidents signed the Esquipulas II Peace Agreement in 1987. This agreement provided for a national reconciliation, an end to hostilities, democratization, free elections, resettlements of refugees and negotiations on arms control in all Central American countries. Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize for this achievement.
- In 1997, a law for the Alternative Resolution of Conflicts and Promotion of Peace was passed. This law requires peace education in every school and also establishes the legal basis for alternative methods of conflict resolution, such as mediation.
- Also in 1997, the Unity Center of Costa Rica introduced the UN-endorsed “Season for Peace and Nonviolence” to Costa Rica. This educational campaign is held each year between January 30th and April 4th, which are the dates of the assassinations of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., respectively. Now the government leads the nation in this campaign each year.
- Costa Rica has been a leader in establishing international human rights instruments, such as the American Convention of Human Rights, and it is the seat of the Inter-American Court on Human Rights.
- In late 2005, Rita Marie Johnson, founder of the Rasur Foundation in Costa Rica, became aware of the Global Alliance for Ministries and Departments of Peace, made up of countries working toward setting up this infrastructure for peace. She began researching the idea of a Ministry for Peace for Costa Rica and, with input from the board of the Rasur Foundation, wrote a proposal to establish a Ministry of Justice and Peace in Costa Rica.
- On May 29, 2006, Rita Marie and the Vice President of the Rasur Foundation, Alexandra Kissling, presented this proposal to Rodrigo Arias, Minister of the Presidency. This initiative would add “Peace” to the title of the Ministry for Justice and empower that ministry to lead peace efforts in Costa Rica. It was embraced by Minister Rodrigo Arias and President Oscar Arias and was then written as a bill. In this process, the bill evolved into a National System for the Promotion of Peace. This legislation was signed by 19 of the 57 congressional representatives and submitted to the Legislative Assembly on November 2nd, 2006. The bill passed unopposed on August 19th, 2009.
- Vice President Laura Chinchilla appointed Rita Marie to represent Costa Rica at the 2007 Summit of the Global Alliance for Ministries and Departments of Peace held in Japan. At this summit, the Global Alliance acknowledged Costa Rica’s progress in establishing a Ministry for Peace and wrote a letter to Vice President Chinchilla, requesting that Costa Rica serve as the host of their 2009 Summit. As a

result, the Costa Rican government hosted the Summit in September 2009, which was attended by over 200 participants from 41 countries.

- While working on the Ministry for Peace bill, Rita Marie added a clause mandating that the new ministry works with non-profit organizations to implement a national plan for peace promotion. Then, when the opportunity arose, she suggested that an alliance of nonprofit organizations be initiated and coordinated by the government. Consequently, on June 17, 2009, the Ministry of Justice and the Rasur Foundation held a meeting, attended by 58 representatives of non-governmental organizations to initiate this work. The meeting was held at the headquarters of the Rasur Foundation and was successful in uniting NGOs to collaborate more closely in peace promotion. This alliance of nonprofit organizations is now called RED de Paz (Network of Peace) and meets regularly, coordinated by the new Ministry for Peace.
- The Rasur Foundation's principal project is the Academy for Peace of Costa Rica (APCR), which was established in October 2003. The mission of the Academy is to empower every student to pass peace skills to the next generation. This academy is in alignment with the proposed national model that is embraced by many in the Global Alliance: a Ministry of Peace with an Academy for Peace as its educational arm; teaching peace in the school system and to leaders and citizens.
- The APCR's training program is called BePeace (SerPaz in Spanish). BePeace is a synergistic skill set that combines coherence and connection to build social and emotional intelligence. This combination allows us to access our natural wisdom and compassion, which efficiently shifts us from stress to peace. Rita Marie created the BePeace practice after learning about "coherence" from the Institute of HeartMath and "connection" from Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication.
- The Academy trains trainers to educate teachers, parents and students in the practice of BePeace. These trainings are held at Quizur, a property that was gifted to the UN University for Peace in 2011 by Rita Marie Johnson with the understanding that the Academy for Peace would be permanently hosted there.
- On October 9, 2012, the Ministry of Education committed to a four-year plan to integrate BePeace into all Costa Rican schools. This plan was being implemented. When President Solis was elected in 2014, Rita Marie met with the new Minister of Education to advocate for the continuation of BePeace implementation. However, it was not continued.
- In July 2013, the University for Peace informed Rita Marie that they were in a financial crisis and could not afford to run a second campus at Quizur. They had not yet registered the property in the National Registry. Eventually ownership of Quizur was returned to Rita Marie. However, by this time, she was running Rasur Foundation International from Gilroy, California.

- In July 2022, Rita Marie and her husband, Ricardo returned to live in Quizur and develop it anew as global headquarters for Rasur Foundation International (RFI). BePeace is now called the Connection Practice and is the only project of RFI.

As a developing country, Costa Rica struggles with many modern-day issues, including escalating violence. However, its history and current efforts clearly demonstrate an ongoing identity with peace. With the steps that Costa Rica and the Rasur Foundation have taken, Costa Rica's model of peace infrastructure has been strengthened.