

Colombia among top picks for Nobel Peace Prize

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The architects of a historic accord to end Colombia's 52-year war are among the favourites to win this year's Nobel Peace Prize as speculation mounts ahead of next week's honours.

The awards season opens Monday with the announcement of the medicine prize laureates in Stockholm, but the most keenly-watched award is that for peace on October 7.

The Norwegian Nobel Institute has received a whopping 376 nominations for the peace prize, a huge increase from the previous record of 278 in 2014—so guessing the winner is anybody's game.

Experts, online betting sites and commentators have all placed the Colombian government and leftist FARC rebels on their lists of likely laureates.

Other names featuring prominently are Russian rights activist Svetlana Gannushkina, the negotiators behind Iran's nuclear deal Ernest Moniz of the US and Ali Akbar Salehi of Iran, Greek islanders helping desperate migrants, as well as Congolese doctor Denis Mukwege who helps rape victims, and US fugitive whistleblower Edward Snowden.

US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is also known to have been nominated, but his chances are seen as low.

Dan Smith, head of the Stockholm International Peace Research

Institute (SIPRI), said Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC leader Timoleon Jimenez would be worthy winners this year, even though the ink on their historic peace accord is barely dry.

Four years of negotiations culminated on Monday when Santos and Jimenez signed the peace deal, which will only be ratified after an October 2 referendum on the accord.

"My hope is that today's Nobel Committee in Oslo is inspired by their predecessors' decision to award the 1993 prize to Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, architects of the peaceful end of apartheid," he told AFP.

That prize came "at a time when the outcome of the transition was uncertain, and with the aim of encouraging all parties to a peaceful outcome, and it succeeded."

His counterpart at Oslo's Peace Research Institute (PRIO), Kristian Berg Harpviken, agreed.

"Both parties have been willing to tackle the difficult issues, and a closure of the conflict is looking increasingly irreversible," he said.

Or maybe migrants

Yet Harpviken's first choice was Gannushkina.

Capping her decades-long struggle for the rights of refugees and migrants in Russia would send a strong signal at a time when "refugee hosting is becoming alarmingly contentious across the West" and would also "draw attention to the problematic record of the current Russian leadership," Harpviken said.

Betting sites, meanwhile, gave Greek islanders the highest odds of taking

home the award for coming to the aid of refugees turning up on their shores after perilous sea journeys from neighbouring Turkey.

Last year, the committee surprised punters by honouring four Tunisian groups that led the country's transition to democracy. They had not been mentioned in any of the pre-announcement speculation.

The other closely-watched prize, that for literature, is also the source of much conjecture, with many of the same writers tipped year after year.

Among the names recurring in Stockholm's literary circles are Japan's Haruki Murakami—who tops betting sites again this year—as well as Syrian poet Adonis, Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o and US authors Don DeLillo, Philip Roth and Joyce Carol Oates.

Yet others include British writer Salman Rushdie, Ismael Kadare of Albania, Israeli author David Grossman, France's Milan Kundera and Norwegian playwright Jon Fosse.

Time for a US writer?

The Swedish Academy, which awards the literature prize, "is either going to choose someone who has been mentioned in the Nobel speculation for a long time, or someone who is a total surprise," culture editor Bjorn Wiman at daily Dagens Nyheter predicted.

"I think it'll be Fosse," Wiman said. "He's exclusive, sort of experimental and it's been a long time since a playwright won the prize."

Harold Pinter of Britain was the most recent playwright to win, in 2005.

Madelaine Levy, literary critic at Sweden's other main daily Svenska Dagbladet, noted meanwhile that Americans were underrepresented of

late, the last US laureate being Toni Morrison in 1993.

"It could be because their writing structure is so close to Hollywood and can be considered not as literary, and the fact that some are too productive," she said.

Swedish literary critic and novelist Sigrid Combuchen just scoffed at the guessing game.

"To speculate about the name of the winner is completely idiotic. It's like asking Santa Claus to tell us what he has in his sack."

Last year, the Academy honoured Belarussian writer Svetlana Alexievich.

The medicine prize kicks off the Nobel season on Monday, followed by physics on Tuesday and chemistry on Wednesday. The date for the literature prize has not been announced yet but usually falls on a Thursday.

The peace prize follows on October 7, and the economics prize winds things up on October 10.

This year's laureates will receive eight million Swedish kronor (around \$932,000 or 831,000 euros) per award, to be shared if there are several winners in one discipline.

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