

PRESS RELEASE

## Intrepid Parliamentarians still exist

This week, Lady Jean Coussins (House of Lords), Fiona O'Loughlin (Irish MP) and Irish Senator Catherine Noone, last week were the first British and Irish Parliamentarians to set foot in the Wounaan Indigenous villages (Colombia) of Agua Clara and Santa Rosa de Guayacán in over half a century.

**Three intrepid female parliamentarians visited the Wounaan Nonam Indigenous Peoples in Colombia's San Juan River. Lady Jean Coussins, Fiona O'Loughlin and Senator Catherine Noone, having heard of the threats, forced displacement and human rights violations against the Wounaan, decided to go and visit this remote biodiverse region of Colombia to see for themselves.**

Travelling on an ABColumbia Delegation with Christian Aid and a local NGO, the Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace (*Comision Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz- CIJP*), these three visited the Wounaan Nonam indigenous communities along the San Juan river in the South West of Colombia, meeting with communities who have suffered forced displacement, been trapped in their territory, seen massacres and continue to feel abandoned and unprotected by the State. The community of Agua Clara, were forced to displace in 2010. Due to a lack of State provision they were forced to live in a small local sports stadium in the city of Buenaventura, in some of the most appalling conditions, which included no electricity or water. Having given up hope of the State ensuring a dignified and safe return, the Agua Clara community returned alone. The Wounaan in Santa Rosa de Guayacán displaced on 11 February 2017, following a paramilitary incursion into their village, they had not long returned when the parliamentarians visited.

Following the visit to Agua Clara, Senator Catherine Noone said: *"The people of Agua Clara have suffered a major trauma, in having to leave their homes and live in such terrible conditions for over a year."*

Fiona O'Loughlin stated: *"the Wounaan told us of their fear of the armed groups that transited the river, these armed groups forced them to displace in the past, now they remain trapped in their territory unable to hunt and fish, and with no meaningful access to healthcare. They told us that children have died from simple things such as diarrhoea. Peace will only be possible and sustainable in Colombia if communities like the Wounaan are safe in their territory and have access to basic services."*

Louise Winstanley, who coordinated the delegation stated: *"the Wounaan communities in the Lower San Juan river, despite the signing of the Peace Accord with the FARC, live in fear of neo-paramilitary groups that transit the river trafficking drugs and arms. We saw the security forces' check points at the entrances and exits of the piece of river we travelled on and yet, despite these, the neo-paramilitary groups appear to move quite freely in the river."*

Colombia has the worst global record for the number of ethnic leaders, peasant farmers and other human rights defenders killed in 2016. According to Colombia's Human Rights Ombudsman, in just the first six months of 2017, this trend has continued with 52 defenders assassinated.

Throughout the visit, Lady Jean Coussins commented, *"what has struck me is how in Colombia, to struggle to uphold human rights, to protect the environment and to return to the land from which you have been forcibly displaced have all become extremely dangerous activities."*

Human Rights defenders across Colombia remain seriously at risk. There was an important focus on human rights in the peace process, but adequate protection is not being given to those who are threatened and killed, this adds to a climate of fear, in a country which is struggling to establish peace.

*Thomas Mortensen, Country Director at Christian Aid comments: "It is very important to bring international attention to this situation to generate the necessary political will. The Colombian state is very strong and I believe that it has the capacity to protect the communities and hope this delegation's visit can generate the political will needed."*

In Bogota, the delegates had the opportunity to meet various ministers and officials in the Colombian Government, including the Environment Minister, Luis Gilberto Murillo, the Vice-Minister for Participation and Equal Rights, Luis Ernesto Gomez Londoño, and Paula Gaviria, the Presidential Advisor on Human Rights. During these official meetings, the parliamentarians discussed their concerns regarding what they had seen and what they had heard from the communities they had met. The delegates have agreed to have further dialogue with the Government and members of Congress, and added their weight to the communities' call for a bilateral ceasefire with the ELN, the second largest guerrilla force in Colombia, which continues to operate. Colombian Congressman Alirio Uribe Muñoz, of the political party 'Polo Democrático', said: *"International support during the Peace Talks has been fundamental to the process and I ask the UK and Irish parliamentarians to ensure that there is the same level of international support for the implementation phase of the Peace Accord."*

#### **Background notes:**

- **Lady Jean Coussins** is a crossbench peer in the House of Lords and is currently a member of the International Relations Select Committee.
- **Louise Winstanley** is the ABColumbia Programme and Advocacy Manager. She has worked on Colombia for the last 13 years, initially in-country with PBI and for the last seven years with ABColumbia.
- **Thomas Mortensen** is Christian Aid's Colombia Country Manager and has overall responsibility for the programme design and implementation. He has been with Christian Aid since 2011.
- **Colombia** is facing a crucial and complex moment in its history. Since the signing of a Peace Accord with the FARC guerrilla group in November 2014, the Colombian government has faced fierce political opposition and challenges related to the implementation of the agreement. Thus far, formidable progress has been made in relation to disarmament of former FARC members. At the same time, violence against social leaders and Human Rights Defenders is increasing, and right-wing neo-paramilitary groups are spreading terror by taking control of territories abandoned by the FARC. Peace Talks with the second-largest guerrilla group, the ELN, recently started and communities are calling for a bilateral ceasefire in order to halt the combats going on between the ELN and neo-paramilitary groups, as communities become caught in the crossfire, the whole community is then being forced to displace.
- **The Wounaan Indigenous People** are a native tribe living along the banks of the remote and beautiful tropical San Juan River in the South-West of Colombia. In 2014, the community of Agua Clara and subsequently in February 2017, Santa Rosa de Guayacán village were forced to flee their ancestral lands as a consequence of the armed conflict. In addition to kidnapping torture of an indigenous leader, the armed neo-paramilitary groups entered the village of Santa Rosa de Guayacán further threatening them.
- **FARC:** Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army) is the largest of the guerrilla groups operating in Colombia
- **ELN:** Ejército Nacional de Liberación (National Liberation Army) is the second largest guerrilla group.
- **ABColumbia** is the advocacy project of a group of five leading UK and Irish organisations with programmes in Colombia: CAFOD, Christian Aid UKI, Oxfam GB, SCIAF and Trócaire. Amnesty International and PBI are observers. ABColumbia members have over 100 partner organisations in Colombia. Since 1997, ABColumbia has been

working on promoting the voice of the most marginalised grass-roots groups in Colombia, mainly, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, Peasant Farmers and women to the attention of the UK and Irish Governments and the European Union. We have accompanied our Colombian partners through some of the most intense moments of the conflict. [www.abcolombia.org.uk](http://www.abcolombia.org.uk)

- **Christian Aid** is a member organisation of ABColumbia, which works in some of the world's poorest communities in around 40 countries. The organisation acts where there is great need, regardless of religion, helping people to live a full life, free from poverty. Christian Aid provides urgent, practical and effective assistance in tackling the root causes of poverty as well as its effects. Christian Aid is a member of the ACT Alliance, a global coalition of more than 130 churches and church-related organisations that work together in humanitarian assistance, advocacy and development. Further details at <http://actalliance.org>

**For press interviews:**

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