

PUBLIC STATEMENT

International Civil Society Organisations condemn the murder of the community leader and land claimant Mario Castaño Bravo and warn of the serious humanitarian and human rights situation that the indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities in the Pacific region are going through, especially in Bajo Atrato, Chocó.

The international civil society organizations that have signed this statement regret and reject the murder of the community leader and land claimant Mario Castaño Bravo, who was a member of the Family Association of the Community Councils of Curvaradó, Jiguamiandó, La Larga Tumaradó, Pedeguita and Mancilla (AFLICOC) and the network of Communities Building Peace in the Territories (CONPAZ). He was killed on the night of 26 November 2017.

Mario Castaño was a victim of forced displacement and had received threats against his life on several occasions, which is why he was granted precautionary protection measures in 2014 and had armed security provided by the National Protection Unit, which is attached to the Ministry of the Interior. This was a measure that once again proved to be insufficient in the face of the risks faced by rural leaders in conflict zones.

Castaño Bravo had denounced legal and illegal businesses for the dispossession of lands in the region, as well as the actions of the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia - AGC*) - *Clan del Golfo*. Just a few days before he participated in the implementation of the fundamental right of prior consultation for the collective reparation of the community and in the preparation of a legal claim for land restitution, which will be filed in a few days' time.

In May of this year there was a mission to monitor the implementation of the Peace Accord and the human rights situation in Bajo Atrato, carried out by the Network for Corporation of Peace (*Espacio de Cooperación para la Paz – ECP*) in May this year, received testimonies about the increase of the presence and territorial control of illegal armed groups after the FARC had left these territories. These referenced the AGC and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN*), highlighting the serious impact their presence has had on the life and security of Afro-descendant, indigenous and campesino communities, as well as for the implementation of the Peace Accord signed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP.

The ECP has also raised concerns about the situation of emergency in Truandó, Salaquí and Riosucio, as well as the dangers that have rapidly arisen in other territories in the region. It has led us to conclude that security **guarantees do not exist for human rights defenders, communities or leaders of social and political movements, despite this being a necessary condition for strengthening peace-building and peaceful coexistence in Colombia**. Unfortunately, this crime reaffirms this.

According to the information provided by the Secretary of Peace (Secretaría de Paz) of Riosucio, 800 families (3,200 people) within the municipality have been forcibly displaced, and 237 families are confined within the region; 80% of them being indigenous. An indiscriminate increase in the use of explosive devices (IEDs, anti-personnel mines and unburned ammunition) have also been reported. The Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace (*Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz – CIJP*) has also denounced armed confrontations between the AGC and the ELN guerrillas near La Larga Tumaradó and Curvaradó.

As international organisations, we are greatly concerned that the advances in the normative implementation of prevention and protection measures laid out in the Peace Accords, and in general with respect to the responsibility of the State, are insufficient or do not exist. Therefore, we recommend to the Colombian government and State Institutions to:

1. Ensure the implementation of the Peace Accord, especially Point 3.4 on matters relating to the protection and prevention of human rights defenders, social leaders and their communities.
2. Take the necessary measures to move forward with a swift and independent investigation that allows the material and intellectual authors of the murder of Mario Castaño to be held to account; as well as those responsible for all attacks, harassment, surveillance and threats against human rights defenders.
3. Strengthen mechanisms of attention, protection and prevention so that they are effective, timely, adequate and applied with a differential approach to people and communities that defend human rights, land and the environment, and thus avoid the murders and other forms of aggression that these people suffer because of their leadership.
4. Move forward in an effective manner with processes of land restitution, territorial clean-up, and guarantees for the safe return for the communities of Curvaradó, Jiguamiandó, Pedeguita Mancilla and La Larga Turmaradó.

Finally, given the general security situation in the region, we request that the Peace Talks between the Government of Colombia and the National Liberation Army ELN respond positively to the request sent by the Afro-Colombian communities of the Bajo Atrato to provide a space for dialogue for them to discuss their fears regarding the territorial control exercised by the ELN over their territories.

Bogotá, 1st December 2017.