

Minister Coveney
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Tánaiste
Iveagh House
80 St Stephen's Green
Dublin

20 December 2017

Dear Minister Coveney,

ABColumbia, the joint advocacy project on Colombia for CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, SCIAF and Trócaire, is writing to you to raise our profound concern regarding the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Colombia and to ask you to raise the recommendations at the end of this letter with the Colombian Government.

Firstly, ABColumbia would like to congratulate your Department on its decision to open an Embassy in Colombia. We believe this is an important gesture demonstrating the Government's commitment to deepening bi-lateral relations with Colombia, as well as, reflecting the special role Ireland has played in promoting the achievement of a Peace Accord in Colombia.

However, since the signing of the Peace Accord we have seen evidence of a systematic pattern in the profiles of HRDs being killed, namely leaders associated with activities in defence of land and the environment, and those working on the implementation of the Peace Accord in the rural areas. According to the UN Refugee Agency, 78 HRDs were killed between 1 January and 17 November 2017.

In just the last three weeks, we have received notification of the killing of two land rights defenders who work with a partner of Christian Aid Ireland, the *Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz* (Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace - CIJP); this work of Christian Aid in Colombia is supported by Irish Aid. CIJP has also visited Ireland and met with Irish Government representatives.

The HRDs Mario Castaño Bravo and Hernán Bedoya were killed on 26 November and 8 December 2017 respectively, they were working on land restitution. Both leaders belonged to "Communities Building Peace in the Territories" (CONPAZ), a network of 140 victims' communities located in 14 departments of Colombia, also a partner of Christian Aid Ireland. There is evidence to show that many of those opposing land restitution are former paramilitaries or powerful landowning families who benefit from local systemic corruption and rely on neo-paramilitary groups to obstruct the land claims processes. Our Christian Aid colleagues in Colombia have been in touch with your Embassy in Mexico about this situation.

In November 2017, Jeffrey Feltman, UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, expressed his deep concern about the reported vacuums of authority in many areas of the country and the resultant insecurity for communities as other illegal groups move in to fill the void. As Christmas approaches, our partners in Colombia are becoming increasingly concerned, since this is traditionally the time of the year when a spike in violence is experienced. Urgent prevention measures by the Colombian Government are therefore essential, alongside the longer-term approach of dismantling the neo-paramilitary structures responsible for these crimes and investigating the relationship between third

party economic interests and the attacks on HRDs working on land restitution. Without effective investigation and prosecution of the material and intellectual authors of attacks against HRDs, guarantees of non-repetition cannot be assured. Also, important in this context is a successful conclusion to the peace talks with the ELN.

The peace process in Colombia has achieved important milestones in a short space of time, despite facing fierce opposition; but the reality that HRDs face every day must be raised if we are to have any chance of addressing this violence. We are concerned that a failure to tackle this could further weaken public support for the already fragile peace process.

We would therefore ask that the Irish Government strongly request the Colombian Government to:

- Implement rapidly and fully the Security Guarantees Chapter (Point 3.4) of the Peace Accord, designed to investigate, prosecute and dismantle the financial and political structures behind paramilitarism.
- Convene the High-Level instance of the Ethnic Chapter to analyse the situation and define strategic and preventive measures.
- Immediately launch investigations into the killings of Mario Castaño Bravo and Hernán Bedoya, and prosecute the perpetrators and the intellectual authors of these crimes.
- Officially invite Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, to Colombia.

As Colombia is under review in the Universal Periodic Review in May 2018, we encourage your Government to focus your questions and recommendations on the **implementation** of measures adopted by the Colombian Government to establish security guarantees for human rights defenders. We would welcome the opportunity to have further discussion with your Department on this issue.

Yours sincerely,



Louise Winstanley
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On Behalf of:

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Cc: H.E. Ms. Barbara Jones, Ambassador of Ireland to Mexico; Mr. David Costello David Costello, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Ireland to Mexico; Caoimhe Ní Chonchúir, Deputy Director (Latin America and Caribbean) Americas Unit, DFA; Áine Hearn, Director of the Conflict Resolution Unit, DFA; Patrick Cogan, Senior Adviser Government of Ireland, H.E. Ambassador Nestor Osorio London, Ambassador to the UK and Ireland.