



PRESS RELEASE

Colombian Acid Attack Survivor and Activist Visiting London

10 October 2018: Patricia Espitia, co-founder of the Colombian NGO *Ven Seremos*, will be in London next week. She will speak to UK leaders about the victims of acid attacks - a crime which in recent years has reached epidemic levels in both Colombia and the UK.

On 13 February 2007, Patricia was attacked whilst walking in Bogotá with her 12-year old daughter. *“Two people came up to me, a man and a woman. Without saying a word, one of them took out a cup and threw its contents at me.”* Patricia felt like she was burning alive for three hours. *“I did not know what was happening to me, I just felt this excruciating pain.”*

The attack permanently disfigured Patricia’s face and caused severe injuries to her body when she was only 27 years old. However, Patricia through her strength and courage turned this experience around and now campaigns with *Ven Seremos*, an organisation she co-founded, for hundreds of other women victims of acid attacks, and for major improvements in medical care and psycho-social support for survivors. In recognition of her work, she is invited to a special dinner in London on 17 October 2017.

Globally, Colombia has one of the highest per capita acid attacks: on average 100 attacks per year. Most of these attacks are against women in their 20s and 30s; the majority perpetrated by men. Survivors of acid violence struggle to access specialist treatment as there are very few burns units in Colombia.

Patricia is campaigning against the persistently high rates of impunity for acid attacks. Due to this campaign, a recent law reform raised the penalties for crimes involving acid. However, Patricia insists that higher penalties alone will not solve the problem of 45% impunity. Without investment in policing resources, most cases will never reach a court.

Colombian journalist and feminist activist Jineth Bedoya supports Patricia’s visit to London, as part of the international campaign *“No Es Hora De Callar”* (It’s not time to be silent). Jineth was [kidnapped and raped](#) by armed actors while working as a journalist. She is determined to give more visibility to [women victims of gender-based violence](#).

“In Colombia, there are over 1,000 victims of acid attacks who have not received the medical and psychological support they need. That’s why this visit is so important – we need to make this issue public at the international level.” said Jineth Bedoya.

Visibility is essential for gender-based crimes, including acid attacks. Because of fear of reprisals and the stigma involved, women’s injuries are often not reported, making it more difficult to address the issue. The symptoms of gender-based violence in Colombia cannot be seen in isolation. The complex context of the Colombian armed conflict adds another dimension to it.

“Decades of internal armed conflict have exacerbated pervasive violent and patriarchal attitudes in Colombian society. Unfortunately, women are the ones that have suffered the most. Even now, two years after the signing of the Peace Accord with the FARC guerrilla, structural discrimination still poses an obstacle for women to obtain justice.” said Louise Winstanley, Programme and Advocacy Manager at the London-based human rights platform ABColumbia, which is working with Jineth Bedoya to support Patricia’s visit to the UK.

Acid attacks against women are an increasing problem in the UK as well. UK and Colombia are both amongst the countries with the highest per capita rate of acid attacks in the world. Hopefully, Patricia’s visit will help to raise the public profile of this issue, which today is an epidemic in both countries.

For press interviews

For interviews with **Patricia Espitia**, **Jineth Bedoya** or **Louise Winstanley**, please contact Communications Coordinator Irina Muñoz at assistant@abcolombia.org.uk; Office Number: 0207 870 2217.

Background Notes

Patricia Espitia was victim of an acid attack when she was 27 years old. She later initiated the advocacy organisation *Fundación Ven Seremos* to tackle impunity for acid attacks in Colombia. She works with hospitals and authorities to improve the treatment and support for survivors in Colombia. Patricia will be in the UK between 17 and 19 October 2018.

Ven Seremos (“Come, let’s be Trust”) is a Colombian NGO, co-founded by Patricia Espitia. The organisation campaigns against impunity for acid attacks, and for better and more immediate medical care and psycho-social support for survivors. They work with hospital burn units, police and prosecutors on how to respond to cases and provide victims with swift care.

Jineth Bedoya Lima is a women’s rights activist and journalist at the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*. She has received a number of national and [international prizes](#) for her journalistic work and her national campaign “No Es Hora De Callar” (It’s not time to be silent).

Louise Winstanley is the ABColombia Programme and Advocacy Manager. She has worked on human rights in Colombia for the last 14 years, initially in-country with PBI and for the last eight years with ABColombia.

ABColombia is the joint 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. ABColombia members have over 100 partner organisations in Colombia, many of them grass-roots groups representing Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, Peasant Farmers and women. In November, ABColombia will publish a [report about gender-based violence as a war crime](#) in the Colombian Peace Accord. <https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/>

Colombia has one of the highest per capita rate of acid attacks worldwide. The Legal Medicine Institute and the National Health Institute reported 1,100 victims of chemical agent attacks between 2004 and 2016. The lack of medical support for victims of acid attacks is a big problem in Colombia – there are only very few hospitals with specialist burn units, making it very difficult for survivors to access the treatments they need. High levels of impunity combined with structural discrimination against women makes it extremely difficult for survivors to obtain justice.

FARC *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) was the largest of the guerrilla groups operating in Colombia until its demobilisation in 2017, following a Peace Accord with the Colombian Government in November 2016. The FARC has now transformed into a political party.

Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) is a London-based organisation that works to end acid violence at a global level and advocates for the rights of survivors. To raise awareness for the issue, they have organised a special dinner, which Colombian acid attack survivor and activist Patricia Espitia will attend on 17 October 2018. <https://www.asti.org.uk/>