

Minister Simon Coveney
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
Tánaiste
Iveagh House
80 St Stephen's Green
Dublin 2 D02 VY53

2 August 2019

Dear Minister Coveney,

ABColumbia members would like to thank the Irish Government and the Irish Embassy in Bogota, for their active engagement with communities and Human Rights defenders in Colombia. Knowing of the key role that Ireland has played in supporting the Colombian peace process, I am writing you to raise concerns regarding the threats and attacks against human rights defenders and the high levels of violence in Chocó, particularly in Bajo Atrato, and in the collective territories of the Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó. The continuing violence against leaders and communities poses a serious obstacle to the implementation of the Peace Accord.

In particular, we would like to share our deep concerns about the repeated threats against members of the Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz (CIJP), a church-based human rights organisation and partner of Christian Aid, PBI Ireland and ABColumbia, with more than 31 years of experience of working to expose human rights violations in the conflict regions of Colombia.

The CIJP is a beneficiary of special protection measures from both the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and the Colombian State. Various members of this organisation have been harassed by neo-paramilitary groups and serious threats made against their lives.

Carlos Fernandez from CIJP, who visited Ireland in September 2018 and met with the Foreign Affairs Latin America Desk and the Human Rights Unit, as well as, with members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Eamon Gilmore, has received a series of warnings linked to his work protecting the Nasa Indigenous People's rights in Putumayo. The latest was a death threat which he received on 26 June 2019. Additionally, on 19 May 2019, soldiers threatened to shoot Fernandez and his bodyguard provided by the State's National Protection Unit.

The Executive Secretary of the CIJP, Danilo Rueda was harassed and threatened by neo-paramilitary groups shortly after he returned from a European Speaking tour highlighting the situation of human rights in the region.

The threats must be seen in the context of the ongoing conflict in the region. Since February 2019, the Bajo Atrato has seen an increase in the armed conflict between the neo-Paramilitary

groups and the ELN guerrilla. The following examples further underline the magnitude of the violence in the Chocó region:

- On 25 June 2019, the CIJP and the Hoyos family from Caño Manso Humanitarian Zone received death threats, which were aimed at forcing the family to abandon their land, in order to deforest it, in preparation for agro-industrial projects. Human rights violations are increasingly linked with environmental destruction in Chocó, which is one of the top 10 biodiversity hotspots in the world.
- On 5 July 2019, a neo-paramilitary group entered the Afro-Colombian collective territory of Curbaradó, threatening the population; and
- On 6 July 2019, the 20-year-old son of an Emberá Indigenous leader from Alto Guayabal in Jiguamiandó was tortured and killed by the neo-paramilitary group *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC). He was tied-up, beaten and, after death, beheaded. It should be noted that there was a recent visit to this area by an international delegation which included the Irish Embassy.

On 10 May 2019, Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said the UN was “...alarmed by the strikingly high number of human rights defenders being killed, harassed and threatened in Colombia, and by the fact that this terrible trend seems to be worsening... [and called on the authorities] to take all necessary measures to tackle the endemic impunity...” At least 116 Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) were killed in 2018, according to the UN.

We are concerned that the lack of protection and intensity in the threats, attacks and killings of human rights defenders is undermining the peace process and democracy in Colombia. We would therefore ask that you specifically raise each of these threats, attacks and killings with the Colombian Government, asking them to request the:

- Public Prosecutor’s Office to investigate, identify and punish both the material and intellectual authors; and that the Special Investigation Unit in the Public Prosecutor’s Office advances in the investigation and dismantling of the neo-paramilitary groups and their support structures;
- Ministry of the Interior to act in accordance with the provisions dictated in several Constitutional Court Orders for land restitution in Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó.

Lastly, we believe it would be important that Ireland encourages the Colombian Government to renew the full mandate of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, which would reaffirm a mutual commitment to ensuring safety and security for human rights defenders.

Yours sincerely,



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