Colombia: The First Ten Weeks of the De La Espriella Government

Overview. Abelardo De La Espriella took office as President of Colombia on 7 August 2026 after defeating Iván Cepeda of the left-wing *Pacto Histórico* by a margin of less than one percentage point. The exceptionally close result underlined Colombia's deep political polarisation. Voter participation was the highest on record, while the geographical distribution of support broadly reflected the pattern seen in the 2016 Peace Accord referendum: Cepeda performed strongly on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, in the south and in Bogotá; De La Espriella drew most of his support from the central Andean region.

Despite the absence of a clear congressional majority, De La Espriella quickly assembled a coalition to support his programme. He was elected on a platform of fiscal austerity and an "iron-fisted" militarised approach to security.

The government's opposition to the 2016 Peace Accord and its emphasis on military responses risk undermining peacebuilding efforts and increasing the vulnerability of conflict-affected communities, particularly women and girls.

As of 31 August 2026, Colombia had registered 10,357,896 victims of the armed conflict. Illegal armed actors numbered 28,000. 1,700 Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and 512 ex-combatants killed since the signing of the Peace Accord. 11,000 of the 13,000 former combatants remain in the peace process.

Actions of the De La Espriella Government in relation to the Peace Process and Security Policy

- Ended all peace talks with armed groups initiated under the previous government's "Total Peace" policy, reactivated arrest warrants for those participating in peace negotiations and extradited five to the USA ending previous protections;
- Intensified military operations, including aerial bombardment and drone use, with a focus on territorial control. But with no plans to address human security.
- Prioritised the capture of prominent leaders of illegal armed groups.
- Removed the rural reform chapter from the mandate of the UN Security Council's Verification Mission in Colombia, thereby reducing the scope of international monitoring for quarterly reporting to the Security Council.
- Proposed legislation to end the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) after ten years, although the Peace Accord and its implementing legislation envisaged a 15-year mandate with the possibility of a five-year extension.
- Replaced the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace with the Office of the National Commissioner for Security.
- Introduced severe budget cuts affecting the government agency responsible for reintegrating former combatants (37%) and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace - JEP (17%). Search Unit for the disappeared (22% reduction) resulting in need to close around half of its forensic units.

Civic Space

Anti-Terrorism Statute. A proposed new statute has prompted serious concern because of its broad and potentially arbitrary definitions of "terrorism" and "collaboration". The vague definitions could criminalise or prevent the work of organisations including, international organisations providing humanitarian relief or demining, CSOs operating in conflict-affected areas, and families seeking to rescue children who have been forcibly recruited.

Restrictions on protest. In October, the government passed Decree 1525/26 tightening regulation on public demonstrations. The UN warned that the decree weakens security safeguards and its vague grounds for ending dialogue could permit an excessive use of force, including against peaceful protesters.

Women's Rights and Gender Equality

- In September 2026, Colombia left **the Equal Rights Coalition,** an international coalition promoting the rights of LGBTI+ people.
- On 8 October, the government formally joined the **Geneva Consensus Declaration**, an international statement opposing reproductive rights for women and asserting that abortion is not an international legal obligation. Although this does not change Colombian law, it sends a damaging signal for gender equality.
- The **Ministry of Equality and Equity** closed at the end of the Petro government. Women's organisations currently lack clarity about the funds allocated to implement the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

A militarised strategy will not deliver sustainable security

When the current government took office, Colombia faced a severe security crisis, with an estimated 28,000 illegal armed actors in nine groups involved in the conflict. Many of these groups combine organised criminal activity—including illegal gold mining, human

trafficking, drug trafficking, with extortion, control of populations and territory.

Improving security is essential, but **the means matter**. A purely militarised response places civilians at greatest risk, can undermine community-led protection systems developed in the absence of the state, and often leave the communities caught in the crossfire. Furthermore, historically, pressure to demonstrate operational success contributed to extrajudicial killings on a vast scale. Conflict poses risks to women, including sexual and other forms of violence. Simply removing leaders and rank-and-file members is insufficient as they are rapidly replaced. Lasting peace and security in Colombia require a human security approach and that addresses the structural drivers of violence over the long term.

Territorial Development and Land Rights

The 2016 Peace Accord, Rural Reform Chapter, already provides a framework for sustainable peace through the Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus (PDETs). There are regional PDETs developed through consultation with the communities, and updated this year, for rural areas most affected by conflict, they take a human-security approach, establishing functioning state institutions and services, programmes for viable livelihoods and crop-substitution, along with meaningful political participation. The Accord's gender provisions also promote women's equal political participation, access to land and access to economic opportunities.

The Comptroller General reported comparatively rapid progress in victims' access to land under the last government. Significant implementation gaps remain:

- Delays continue in issuing definitive ownership titles for land that has been returned or allocated, and land-acquisition processes need to be strengthened.
- Beneficiaries still have limited access to productive support and economic opportunities.

The De La Espriella government's criticism of its predecessor's approach to land acquisition and redistribution has created serious concern about the future direction of reform. On 10 August, the Minister of Agriculture announced a comprehensive review of land delivery, restitution and tenure-formalisation measures, including a 90-day suspension of new actions while existing processes are assessed. Consolidating recent gains in access to land is essential to peace, rural livelihoods and the credibility of the Accord.

International Cooperation

International cooperation with Colombia has fallen drastically. CSOs rely on this and are reporting they are cutting back on programmes and staff. The withdrawal of US-AID hit Colombia particularly hard, 400 million dollars withdrawn from youth, peace and anti-gang programs, and in e.g. Chocó Department, approximately 70% of humanitarian funding ended. With a government that is cutting drastically funding to Peace Accord and the National Action Plan (NAP) 1325. It is essential to ensure that funds reach local CSOs if peace building is to continue, women and LGBTIQ+ persons protected, impunity addressed, victims' rights upheld and rural communities accompanied.

It will be essential that the International Community:

- supports financially and politically the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to accompany local organisations and communities. Provide technical expertise, monitoring and reporting. They had approximately a 50% cut in their budget over the last two years;
- ensures that the Mission of Verification maintains a mandate to monitor the implementation of the Peace Accord;
- direct support to CSOs to implement key aspects of the NAP1325, to support victims in the JEP, and to develop self-protection strategies for rural communities, leaders and human rights defenders.

Key messages

- Protect the institutions, mandates and funding needed to implement the 2016 Peace Accord, including the JEP, the Search Unit for Disappeared Persons and mechanisms supporting former combatants' reintegration.
- Ensure that security policy is grounded in human security, civilian protection and establishment of state institutions—not military force alone.
- Support CSOs defending civic space, peaceful protest and human rights; publicly oppose their stigmatisation and restrictions on their work
- Maintain Colombia's commitments to women's rights, gender equality and the implementation of the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.
- Support the Mission of Verification and the UN OHCHR
- Encourage the Government to implement the PDETs, resume and accelerate land delivery, restitution, tenure formalisation and productive projects support in conflict-affected rural areas.
- Provide ongoing support politically, financially and technically for the protection of HRDs.