



A street scene in Colombia. Photo: CSW

COLOMBIA

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The population of Colombia is predominantly Christian,¹ and many citizens participate in religious activities on a regular basis without any hindrance. A significant percentage of the population, however, is subjected to consistent and serious violations of their religious freedom, belief and conscience. In the wider population these violations take place within and as a part of the context of the armed conflict. Indigenous communities suffer conflict-related violations of freedom of religion, belief and conscience, but have also seen these rights severely curbed by the Colombian courts which have ruled in favour of traditional authorities seeking to impose religious uniformity in their communities.

While there have been significant steps taken in terms of the conflict, especially in the form of the ongoing dialogue between the largest leftist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–Army of the People (FARC-EP), and the government; violations of human rights, including attacks on civilian populations and severe restrictions on religious freedom, continue or have grown worse in many parts of the country. The National Liberation Army (ELN) and various neo-paramilitary groups, notably the Urabeños, also known as Clan Usuga, are moving or expanding into territories up until now controlled by the FARC-EP. Both are responsible for serious human rights violation, including violations of freedom of religion, belief and conscience.

¹ The term includes both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

CSW partners in Colombia continue to document human rights violations experienced by communities of faith including hundreds of violations of freedom of religion, belief and conscience. Church leaders are the regular targets of threats, forced displacement or assassination.

Young people, including Christian youth, continue to be forced into illegal armed groups or the military, even when they try to declare themselves conscientious objectors based on deeply held religious beliefs. Christian converts attempting to leave illegal armed groups are forced into hiding or killed. Illegal armed groups continue to impose severe restrictions on religious activity in many parts of the country, in some cases prohibiting it altogether. Churches are also frequent targets for extortion by the armed groups. Finally, in some indigenous communities, traditional authorities are responsible for closing down non-traditional religious buildings, attempting to force members of their communities to reconvert back to traditional beliefs and religious practices, and forcibly displacing those who refuse to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Colombia

- Take the lead in guaranteeing respect for the rights associated with freedom of religion, belief and conscience. This includes ensuring that these rights, as set out in Colombia's constitution as well as in the American Convention on Human Rights (San José Pact), the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), are upheld for all inhabitants and citizens of Colombia;
- Set an example in respecting the rule of law and ensure that men and women working on behalf of the government, including government leaders, members of the intelligence services and members of the police and military, strictly follow international humanitarian law and meet international human rights standards, including those relating to freedom of religion, belief and conscience;
- Through the offices of the Attorney General, initiate and carry out investigations into assassinations of, attacks on and threats made against religious leaders, including cases of forced disappearance; and offer adequate protection and security for witnesses and others who denounce human rights violations;
- Increase its aid and support to internally displaced communities and, most importantly, ensure that local and regional governments are held accountable for funds and other forms of aid to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) channelled through their offices and agencies;
- Allocate sufficient resources for effective follow up, support and protection for those members of illegal armed groups who agree to demobilise as part of the

peace processes, and engage with civil society groups to create comprehensive programmes to assist the demobilised in the reintegration process;

- Recognise the role that neo-paramilitary groups play in the conflict and incorporate the acts of these groups in overall conflict-related statistics, including homicides and forced displacements;
- Carry out investigations into reports of collusion between illegal armed groups and government officials;
- Implement effective legal mechanisms for the protection of children who are under threat of forcible recruitment into illegal armed groups, or who have already been forcibly recruited by these groups;
- As peace dialogues continue, and in the event of a new dialogue being initiated with the ELN, make a concerted effort to incorporate civil society, including major religious groups, and victims of the actors in the conflict in an active role in the dialogues. Truth and justice must be an integral part of any agreement;
- Uphold the right to freedom of conscience and cease singling out for punishment individuals and communities who refuse to take part in activities which go against their values and beliefs.

To the armed actors

- Lay down their weapons, cease all illegal activities and pursue a negotiated solution to the conflict. As long as hostilities continue, however, CSW calls on all the armed actors to respect and follow international humanitarian law and meet international human rights standards;
- All parties in the conflict should take immediate measures to ensure that freedom of religion, belief, and conscience as well as respect for places of worship, are upheld in all parts of the country. This includes allowing churches which have been forcibly shut down to reopen, and guaranteeing the rights of individual religious communities to meet together for religious purposes in all parts of the country;
- Stop targeting church leaders and allow them to carry out their work without hindrance;
- All parties in the conflict should immediately cease the practice of forcible recruitment of minors and of adults;
- Uphold the right to freedom of conscience and cease singling out for punishment individuals and communities who refuse to take part in illegal activities, or activities which go against their values and beliefs.

To the government of the United States

- Take steps to substantially reorient its foreign assistance to Colombia away from military assistance and towards projects that promote peace and development and benefit the civilian population. US foreign assistance funds should support the peace process and the implementation of peace accords;
- Restructured aid should focus on the safe and sustainable return of land for internally displaced persons and refugees, including titling and de-mining; integration support for those displaced communities that do not

wish to return to their places of origin; and alternative economic development programmes that respect human rights and the environment and are developed in consultation with local communities. Under the existing aid programme, the US should provide funding for the development of more effective protection programmes for human rights defenders, including religious leaders, returned communities, and other communities at risk;

- Recognising that those who participated in the violence will require support in order to build a peace that lasts, US aid should also support the reintegration of demobilised members of illegal armed group fighters and social services, including psychological and educational support for child soldiers;
- Develop an aid strategy that will help to prevent a return to violence by supporting a strengthened justice system, an independent truth commission and an independent mechanism to verify confessions and peace accord compliance;
- Recognise the role of and maintain a dialogue with Colombian religious communities, including Protestant and Catholic faith-based organisations, victims' associations and citizens' organisations in the process of reconciliation; as they assist victims, help in the reintegration of demobilised guerrillas, provide support services to child soldiers, and reweave the social fabric of their local communities;
- Continue to monitor freedom of religion, belief and conscience in Colombia under the International Religious Freedom Act and regularly raise this issue with the government of Colombia, encouraging the government to take proactive steps to protect the freedom of religion, belief and conscience of all Colombian citizens.

To the European Union (EU) and EU Member States

- As the FARC-EP and the government of Colombia continue in dialogue working toward a peace agreement, the EU should seek ways to support this process and to push the parties to incorporate into any peace agreement the concerns and rights of the victims of human rights atrocities committed by both sides;
- Maintain the substantial amounts of humanitarian and development aid given to Colombia each year, much of it aimed at 'peace laboratories' and support for the displaced, and do its utmost to ensure that the aid in its entirety reaches the target populations;
- Encourage the government of Colombia to seek more effective ways to support its displaced population;
- While acknowledging the efforts that the EU makes to engage with representatives of civil society in Colombia, and in particular its commitment to support human rights defenders under the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, the EU should ensure that it incorporates into its dialogues representatives of different faith organisations, including the Protestant and Catholic Churches;
- Seek ways to improve support for the rehabilitation of child soldiers, with regard to the Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflict, and increase assistance to agencies and organisations that aid children fleeing forced

recruitment by the armed groups;

- Instruct its representations in Colombia, including the EU Delegation and EU member state embassies, to continue to reach out to civil society groups, with regard to the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, to ensure that they are aware of these guidelines and their implementation. The EU should take into account the fact that human rights defenders carrying out grassroots documentation of human rights violations, and community leaders including religious leaders working in volatile regions, are particularly vulnerable, but also the least likely to be aware of these policies; and should seek ways to address this problem.

CONTEXT

In 2015, the government of Colombia made significant progress in terms of a resolution to the 50-year conflict, notably in the form of the ongoing dialogue between the largest leftist guerrilla group, the FARC-EP, and the government. However, civil society groups including organisations representing religious institutions, and umbrella church groups, have raised questions regarding the impact and the legitimacy of the dialogues. These concerns include the exclusion of non-Catholic religious groups and the communities of victims they represent, from all but one of the civil society forums. There are also concerns about oversight and verification in the truth and justice process which is to accompany the peace agreement, and which relies on full confessions in return for reduced sentences.

The ELN has expressed interest in a similar dialogue but as yet is not engaged in any peace talks. It continues to operate across the country and appears to be making inroads into areas until now controlled by the FARC-EP. Worryingly, another leftist guerrilla group, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), which is heavily involved in drug trafficking and had appeared to be diminishing in terms of activity over the past decade, was responsible for seven mass displacements in 2015, compared to none in 2014. The leader of the EPL was killed in October 2015.

President Santos' government has officially acknowledged the growing threat to security posed by neo-paramilitary groups.² While multiple groups continue to operate

2 The government refers to these groups as 'criminal bands' or BANCrim, in order to differentiate between these groups and the paramilitary groups which were supposed to have officially demobilised under the government of Alvaro Uribe. This also allows the government to exclude human rights violations, including forced displacement, committed by these groups from official statistics relating to the conflict. However, CSW and our in-country partners use the term 'neo-paramilitary groups' as we believe it more accurately describes the origin of these groups, which are largely made up of and led by members of the supposedly demobilised paramilitary groups; and their central role as actors in the armed conflict.

across the country, the most powerful neo-paramilitary group currently, the Urabeños, continues to expand and consolidate power in regions across the country. Like the ELN, neo-paramilitary groups are aggressively expanding into areas controlled until now by the FARC-EP. In late April 2013, the Colombian Integrated Intelligence Centre announced that the Urabeños had grown larger in terms of numbers than the ELN, Colombia's second largest left-wing guerrilla group.³

In 2012 President Santos' administration initiated important legislation pertaining to victims' rights and land reform. Implementation continues to be inconsistent, especially as the security situation in some parts of the country continues to deteriorate. Some victims and communities of victims who have attempted to work with government programmes to return home, report that serious insecurity and ongoing threats from illegal armed groups have negatively affected their ability to remain on their land.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Colombia declined significantly in 2015, by 33%, while the number of mass displacements remained steady as compared to 2014. There were 166,000 forcibly displaced individuals; 13,950 of those were part of mass forced displacements. Criminal or neo-paramilitary groups were responsible for 53% of IDPs, while guerrilla groups were responsible for 47%.

Notably, the number of mass displacements committed by the ELN and the EPL rose significantly, while those committed by neo-paramilitary groups declined slightly and the number of FARC-EP-provoked mass displacements almost halved.⁴

CSW's interviews with victims indicate troubling ties between the various illegal armed groups, making it difficult, in some cases, to definitively identify which group was responsible for forced displacements or other human rights violations. In one case, a pastor who was forcibly displaced in 2015 showed CSW written threats from both ELN and FARC-EP commanders operating in the region, strongly suggesting that the two groups are working together in that area. In a separate case, in another part of the country, CSW was given copies of a general threat made in early 2016 against all pastors in the area; a threat which appeared to be authored by neo-paramilitary groups impersonating guerrillas. This can lead to confusion on the ground, increased fear in a

civilian population which does not know where threats are coming from, and difficulty in documenting or responding to urgent cases.

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Colombian Christians in some regions, specifically conflict zones and areas controlled or contested by illegal armed groups,⁵ continue to experience generalised moderate to severe violations of freedom of religion, belief and conscience. Religious leaders in many of these areas, including the departments of Arauca, Bolívar, Caquetá, Chocó, Cauca, Córdoba, La Guajira, Guaviare, Meta, Norte de Santander, and Santander report that the overall security situation and respect for human rights, including the specific issue of freedom of religion, belief and conscience, remains bad or has continued to deteriorate over the past year. The peace dialogue between the FARC-EP and the government has not yet resulted in an improvement in respect for freedom of religion, belief and conscience in areas under FARC-EP control; instead, church leaders report continued threats and attacks.

In some regions religious activity has been prohibited or severely restricted by the illegal armed groups. The FARC-EP and the ELN in particular have a long history of persecution of religious groups or individuals in areas under their influence or control. In some cases they have prohibited any Christian activity. Over the course of the 50-year conflict, hundreds of church leaders who defied these restrictions and continued to carry out their ministry either openly or clandestinely were targeted for assassination by both groups. These include Reverend Manuel Camacho, murdered in the Guaviare region in 2009, and Pastors Humberto Mendez and Joel Cruz Garcia, both murdered in Huila in 2007; all three pastors reportedly defied FARC-EP restrictions on preaching and evangelising. A number of pastors in Arauca, Norte de Santander, southern Córdoba and north-east Antioquia were forcibly displaced by the ELN or neo-paramilitary groups in 2015. In early 2016 CSW interviewed some of these recently displaced pastors in north-east Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar and southern Córdoba, who stated they were specifically targeted by the illegal armed group because of their religious activities.

In other areas, while not imposing a blanket ban on the practice of Christianity, the two guerrilla groups have enforced severe restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. In 2013 a document published in the southern region of Putumayo by the FARC-EP, called the *Manual for Co-Existence*, was leaked. CSW partners in Colombia report that it is still in effect today. The manual restricts the construction of 'Evangelical⁶ chapels' in the heavily rural area to municipal capitals and states that 'pastors

3 InSight Crime, "Urabeños Now Have More Members Than ELN", 30 April 2013 www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-now-have-more-members-than-eln

4 Sala Humanitaria, www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/colombia/document/colombia-bolet%C3%A9n-humanitario-mensual-enero-diciembre-2015

5 For the purposes of this report the term 'illegal armed groups' refers to left-wing guerrilla groups, including the FARC-EP, the EPL and the ELN, and all neo-paramilitary groups, unless otherwise specified.

6 In general the term 'Evangelical' can be assumed to refer to all Protestants, as the words are interchangeable in Latin American Spanish.

and priests will only hold their masses in the churches in the municipal capitals.' Priests and pastors in the region who have attempted to conduct ministry in the villages and hamlets outside the municipal capitals have reportedly come under threat or been forcibly displaced. Similar restrictions are in effect in other parts of the country still under FARC-EP influence, and in areas under ELN control, including Arauca, Norte de Santander, Choco, Bolivar, Sucre, Cordoba, Cauca and Antioquia. Church leaders in some urban areas, including the poorer sectors of Medellín and Bogotá, also report a continued increase in violence and other violations of human rights including freedom of religion or belief.

All the illegal armed groups specifically target civil society leaders, including religious leaders, attempting to force them to cooperate, as part of their strategy to bring entire communities under their authority and control. All the groups also enforce strict rules prohibiting free movement in areas under their control or influence. This results in regular infringements upon freedom of assembly and freedom of religion, for people in these locations. CSW received reports that the various groups also attempted to co-opt church funds by extorting churches and church leaders, and held compulsory 'indoctrination assemblies', where they warned Christians that failure to actively cooperate would cause them to be considered enemies and legitimate targets for assassination.

ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Work as a church leader, pastor or priest is particularly dangerous, and UN reports by various Special Rapporteurs have named church representatives as a category of human rights defender under particular threat. Church leaders, especially in rural areas, by default often hold a leadership role within their larger community, not just within their church. As mentioned previously, hundreds of church leaders have been assassinated by the illegal armed groups since 2000. In addition to these targeted assassinations, many more church leaders have been forcibly displaced while others live and work under constant threat.

While the targeting of church leaders by leftist guerrilla groups can be rooted in an ideological antipathy to religion, there is also a more practical motive behind these violations—a motive shared by the neo-paramilitary groups. All these groups, on both the left and right, operate on a basis of total societal control in the areas in which they are present. The presence of a strong or growing church, whose members do not share the values of the illegal armed group, can be viewed as a threat to the authority of the group.

As one pastor and community leader told CSW during a visit in early 2016, "[The neo-paramilitaries] see the church as a threat because our church has strengthened the community." In the same way, a church leader who preaches biblical principles can also find themselves in direct conflict with an illegal armed group that is pressuring the local population to actively or passively collaborate in their illegal and often violent activities.

Another pastor, who had recently been forced to flee from an ELN-controlled area, said, "It's dangerous for [the guerrillas] when people join the church. People change. They wake up and reject the ideas of the guerrilla. Christians are dangerous."

This is a particular problem in rural villages where the wider community often looks up to church leaders as community leaders, as mentioned above. One example is Reverend Salvador Alcántara, who has been forced into hiding at various points over the last five years after receiving death threats from neo-paramilitary groups linked to the drug lord Manuel Enrique Barreto, alias 'Don Pedro'. While he continues to receive threats, he is not currently in hiding and continues to work as a pastor in El Garzal, a community in Bolivar. The community has repeatedly been threatened with mass forced displacement by Mr Barreto, who claims the land as his own, and neo-paramilitary groups. Reverend Alcántara has stated publicly on multiple occasions that he feels it is his obligation as a Christian and as a pastor to remain in his community and to lead them in their pursuit of justice. Pastors in other villages in the region are under threat for similar reasons.

While more prevalent, threats to church leaders and churches are not confined to rural areas. In January 2015 a major neo-paramilitary group, the Águilas Negras, published and circulated a death threat which listed the names of 39 civil society leaders including five Protestant denominational leaders, Milton Mejía, Germán Zarate and Jairo Barriga of the Presbyterian Church, Fernando Sánchez of the Anglican Church, and Agustín Jiménez of the Mennonite Church, in the Atlantic Coast region earlier this year. The threat also named 'all Evangelical churches' in the cities of Barranquilla and Sincelejo as targets; this is the first time to CSW's knowledge that a neo-paramilitary group has made a blanket threat to churches in general in a particular area.⁷ CSW partners believe that the threat was issued because of the strong social ministry, of both the individuals and groups of churches named, with victims of the armed conflict in the region, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

In addition to targeted acts of violence against church leaders, rank and file Christians also pay a high price for actions rooted in their faith. Christian adults and youths who rebuff attempts at forced recruitment into illegal armed groups for reasons of conscience, and converts to Christianity who wish to leave the armed groups, must go into hiding or be killed. Christian families and communities who resist the illegal armed groups'

⁷ In the mid 2000s FARC defectors reported that a general order had been issued by commanders to consider all Protestant pastors as military targets.

demands, including payment of protection money and involvement in the illegal drug trade, which they find incompatible with their faith, often face horrific consequences. The majority of these victims come from already historically marginalised communities with little public voice. A significant percentage are campesinos, small-scale and subsistence farmers, living in rural parts of the country, and many are from Afro-Colombian or indigenous communities.

Extortion is practised systematically across the country by all the illegal armed groups, and is a serious problem both for churches, which the armed groups often assume to have access to large amounts of money, and for individual members of churches who are targeted. During CSW's visit to Colombia in early 2016, scores of pastors, in Arauca, Cauca, southern Cordoba, and north-east Antioquia reported that they or their churches were being extorted by illegal armed groups. Church leaders who refuse to turn over donations to the church, which they view as sacred, to the illegal armed groups, frequently come under threat; many are ultimately forcibly displaced as a result. One pastor expressed a position common to many other church leaders: "As a pastor, I'll flee rather than pay the vaccination fee.⁸ I will not contribute God's money to finance a 60-year war."⁹

While individual Christians are not usually extorted specifically because of their religious beliefs, these beliefs often compel them to refuse to comply with the demands of the illegal armed group, and this puts them at particular risk. In February 2015 a 74-year-old professor at the Baptist Seminar in Cali received a phone call from a man identifying himself as a member of the Rastrojos neo-paramilitary, group and demanding 8 million pesos (approximately £1,700) to buy munitions for the group. The professor was told that if he refused to pay he would be considered a military target and his family would be at risk of assassination. The professor immediately declined to cooperate, because of his deeply held religious convictions. Follow-up calls repeated the threat of assassination and gave the professor 72 hours to leave the city. While the professor took the courageous but regrettably all too rare step of filing a formal police report regarding the extortion attempt, he and his family were ultimately forced to flee the city and resettle in hiding elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Colombian state actors are also regularly guilty of violating freedom of conscience. The Constitutional Court has issued numerous rulings,

most recently in January 2015 in the case of Reinaldo Aguirre Bernal, that the right to conscientious objection on religious grounds to obligatory military service is protected by the constitution; and that the military forces' practice of forced recruitment can be defined as arbitrary detention and is prohibited by both Colombian and international law. However, military forces continue to routinely and systematically violate this right, forcibly inducting young men who hold strong religious beliefs that prohibit them from taking up arms. Following a study and recommendations from the National Ombudsman's Office on ongoing violations of freedom of conscience, efforts were made in mid-2015 to create legislation that would establish the legal parameters of this right; unfortunately, the legislation was not approved in the Colombian Congress.

In January Oscar Suarez, a member of the Mennonite Church, which has historically maintained a strong pacifist doctrine, was arbitrarily detained by the National Army while travelling by bus from Villavieja, Meta, to Bogota. Army officials stopped the vehicle and asked for identity documents and, although lacking any kind of administrative or legal order, forced Mr Suarez to board an army truck used to recruit men without papers proving military service. The young man informed the army that he was a conscientious objector, a university student and a religious studies student (all legal reasons for service deferral), but was taken against his will to an army base.

At the base, military officials informed Mr Suarez that he had broken the law because he had not defined his military situation, ignoring the fact that he had voluntarily presented himself to a local base on multiple occasions, without resolution. He was detained by force for one day and forced to undergo medical exams, declared fit for service and threatened with forcible induction into the army. Finally, although the military continued to refuse to recognise his right to conscientious objection, Mr Suarez was able to prove that he is currently a student and was released on this basis, although his military status remains 'undefined', leaving him vulnerable to future arbitrary detention and forced recruitment.

As mentioned previously, illegal armed groups also practise forced recruitment of civilians, and often minors, into their ranks. During CSW's visit to Colombia in early 2016, church leaders from areas where there is a high presence of illegal armed groups said that this is an ongoing problem, particularly with the ELN and with neo-paramilitary groups who are pressuring and threatening young men and women from their churches in an attempt to recruit them. CSW also heard from one pastor in southern Cordoba that despite an avowal by the FARC-EP leadership to freeze recruitment, which apparently has been upheld in most parts of the country, the local FARC-EP battalion is continuing to forcibly recruit young people including at least one from his church.

⁸ Money extorted by the illegal armed groups is frequently referred to as *la vacuna*, or a vaccination fee.

⁹ The conflict started in 1964/66, but many people include the period of violence in the 1950s – this accounts for some differences in the length of time referred to when discussing the war.

VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Members of Colombia's indigenous communities continue to suffer systematic violations of religious freedom. These violations are largely rooted in a 1998 Constitutional Court ruling¹⁰ that, in a split judgement, upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce the observation of and participation in traditional religious beliefs and practices on indigenous reserves. The same court and lower courts have referred to the 1998 decision in subsequent religious freedom cases,¹¹ reaffirming the right of indigenous governors to prohibit the practice of certain religions on indigenous reserves.

In some communities the traditional authorities have taken this ruling to mean that they have the authority to punish those who decline to profess or participate in traditional beliefs. Individuals and groups who follow non-traditional religions have become particular targets. The forced displacements by traditional authorities of Protestant Christians in the Arhuaco and Kogi communities, in 1998, 2007 and 2009 respectively, have yet to be resolved. In addition, over the past year CSW has continued to receive reports of forced church closures, threats of violence, threats of forced displacement and the use of corporal punishment on individuals who refuse to reconvert to traditional belief systems in various indigenous communities, including the Arhuaco, Kogi, Wounaan, Embera Katio and Nasa.

In 2013 seven Christian families in the Talaga Nasa reserve in Cauca were threatened with the destruction of their homes. The situation has escalated since April 2009 with an order by the traditional authorities that the families should be stripped of their land and expelled from the community. The families refused to leave their homes; however, their productive land was confiscated by the local authorities, essentially depriving them of their livelihood. In 2012 the local authorities forcibly closed the local church and expropriated all the congregation's assets, including 1.43m Colombian pesos (approximately £500), the church's musical instruments, and kitchen utensils including pots and pans. According to one witness, "This was with the aim of stopping us from meeting or holding services."

When CSW visited Colombia in early 2016 Christian leaders from the Nasa people group expressed concern that the situation is still tense on their reserves, with at least one large group of Nasa Christians in Huila at risk of forced displacement.

Indigenous Christians frequently come under pressure not only from the indigenous authorities but from illegal armed groups that operate on or near the reserves. In

Cauca a typed letter which was circulated throughout the Nasa community gives 15 days' notice before movement between communities will be prohibited, and specifically mentions that 'pastors of different denominations' will be subject to this prohibition. The letter explicitly says that their 'men of war' will use their weapons to punish those who do not obey the order, and carries the heading and signature 'Valleys and Mountains of Colombia' making it difficult to identify which illegal armed group is behind the threats.

In southern Cordoba CSW also interviewed Christian leaders from the Emberia-Katio people group who have been forcibly displaced from their reserve in the Nudo de Paramillo by both FARC-EP and neo-paramilitary groups but who also have been threatened by their own leaders because of their conversion to Christianity. The group, which is now living as IDPs in Tierralta, does not believe that the peace process will facilitate their return to their homes, and fears the growing neo-paramilitary presence in the area, telling CSW, "The guerrillas are making peace but as I see it, the peace they are making is for over there, but it makes it more complicated here." They expressed concern that the government has made it impossible for them to register as IDPs in Tierralta and they are receiving no aid. They told CSW they fear for the long term prospects of their people group, which numbers approximately 6,660 people, "As we are displaced we lose our culture, they young people do not want to be indigenous any more, they become like regular Colombians, like you."

10 Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia SU-510/98 www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/1998/su510-98.htm

11 Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-1022/01 www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2001/T-1022-01.htm

Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-349/08 www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2008/T-349-08.htm

CONCLUSION

The scale of the conflict and the number of its victims can be overwhelming. However, when analysing the situation and breaking down the demographics of the men, women and children affected by the conflict, it is clear that certain groups of people and communities are particularly and consistently targeted by the different armed groups. Some, for example members of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, are often targeted because of who they are and where they live. Others, like trade unionists, journalists and human rights defenders, are targeted because of what they do. Christian leaders and communities of faith, and the individual members of these communities, are targeted across the country for all these reasons. In some cases, they are targeted for no reason other than what they believe. In others, they are targeted because of how those beliefs translate into the way they live.

Despite some progress and important steps towards a cessation of the armed conflict in 2015, violations of freedom of religion, belief and conscience continue to

take place on a daily basis in Colombia. These violations are committed by all parties in the internal armed conflict including the FARC-EP, the ELN, neo-paramilitary groups and the Colombian military. However, because of the difficulties and dangers in documenting and reporting these cases, especially within the general context and the apparent freedom of worship enjoyed by Christians in many more visible parts of the country, the situation is underreported and receives little attention.

Despite the risks, members of the affected communities continue to document their suffering and to call for their basic human rights, guaranteed in the Colombian constitution and under international law, to be respected. The Colombian government and the illegal armed groups must take concrete steps to ensure that the rights of the victims are upheld, and that their voices and concerns are intentionally included in the peace process and any resulting agreement. The international community must be vigilant in holding the different actors in the conflict, including the Colombian government, to account in this respect.

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