

Colombia: Assignment report

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CSW is an advocacy organisation specialising in freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and works on over 20 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Based in London, CSW has offices in Brussels, Washington DC and Nigeria, and holds United Nations accreditation.

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, however, is subjected to consistent and serious violations of their freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of conscience. In the wider population these violations mostly take place within and as part of the context of the internal armed conflict. Indigenous communities suffer conflict-related FoRB violations, but have also seen FoRB severely curbed by courts ruling in favour of traditional authorities seeking to impose religious uniformity in their communities.

There have been some significant steps in terms of the conflict, especially in the form of the peace agreement signed in November 2016 between the largest leftist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–Army of the People (FARC-EP), and the government. Nevertheless, 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. Another leftist guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), various neo-paramilitary groups, and organised criminal groups² have expanded into territories historically controlled by the FARC-EP and are now vying for control. All are responsible for serious human rights violations, including violations of FoRB and of freedom of conscience.

CSW partner organisations in Colombia continue to document human rights violations experienced by communities of faith, including hundreds of violations of FoRB and of freedom of conscience. These organisations include the Colombian Council of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL); Justapaz,³ an NGO linked to the Mennonite Church; and Corporación Para el Desarrollo Social Comunitario (CORSOC), a regional NGO in the north of the country linked to the Association of Evangelical Churches of the Caribbean (AIEC).

¹ This term includes both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

² ‘Neo-paramilitary groups’ refers to groups that reformed under other names following the paramilitary demobilisation process in 2006, but continued to operate in much the same way. ‘Criminal groups’ refers to new groups involved in organised crime. While there is considerable overlap between the two types of groups, the Colombian government tends to refer to them all as criminal bands or *bancrim*.

³ Justapaz is a Christian Mennonite association with a decades-long history of promoting non-violent peacebuilding processes and accompanying Christian churches, organisations and victims of the armed conflict in Colombia. Justapaz partners with the Presbyterian Church of Colombia through the platform DiPaz (Interchurch Dialogue for Peace in Colombia).

Church leaders are the regular targets of threats, forced displacement or assassination. 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 frequently extorted by illegal armed groups. Finally, in some indigenous communities, traditional authorities attempt to force members of their communities to reconvert back to traditional beliefs and religious practices, and punish or forcibly displace those who refuse to do so.

Recommendations

To the government of Colombia

- Continue to pursue peace agreements with all actors in the armed conflict.
- Fully implement the peace agreement, rather than unilaterally modifying it, in order to bring an end to the violence as soon as possible.
- Accelerate and fully invest in reintegration programmes as outlined in the agreement.
- Ensure that dialogues with all actors in the conflict include the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of conscience as a priority, calling for an end to all restrictions.
- Ensure that strong mechanisms are put in place to investigate human rights violations committed by all actors in the conflict, including the murder and forced disappearance of church leaders and missionaries.
- Address the issue of illegal armed groups forcibly living with religious leaders and other community leaders, and take measures to provide security in these areas and to ensure the protection of religious leaders.
- Ensure that the Office of the Attorney-General prioritises its investigations of killings of human rights defenders, including religious leaders.
- Enact legislation that will protect freedom of religion or belief for all Colombians, including those living on indigenous lands.

To the international community

To the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

- Dissuade the Colombian government from making unilateral changes to the peace agreement that could threaten implementation of the agreement or encourage the FARC-EP to take up arms once again.
- Encourage the government to increase its presence in, and take steps to fight corruption in, areas previously controlled by the FARC-EP; and work towards peace talks with all illegal armed groups.
- In order to ensure the protection of religious leaders and other human rights defenders, investigate cases of illegal armed group members forcibly living in pastors' homes.
- The UK Prosperity Fund for Colombia must promote peace and the substitution of illicit economies in order to protect vulnerable communities, including those who refuse to grow coca on account of their moral or religious beliefs. The Fund must also prevent forcible displacement of people living on lands with natural resources, for the purposes of illegal mining.

To the European Union (EU) and EU Member States

- Urge the Colombian government to uphold all its obligations under the 2016 peace agreement, especially concerning the Special Jurisdiction for Peace.
- Encourage the government to recognise the rights of all indigenous communities and their members, including those who have converted away from traditional beliefs.
- Maintain the substantial amounts of humanitarian and development aid given to Colombia each year, much of it aimed at supporting Internally Displaced Persons, and do its utmost to ensure that the aid in its entirety reaches the target populations.
- 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.

To the United States of America

- 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.
- 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.

- 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.

Context

The Colombian Congress approved a revised peace agreement between the government and the FARC-EP on 20 November 2016, after the original peace agreement was narrowly rejected by 50.24% of the population in a national plebiscite on 2 October 2016. However, civil society groups, including organisations representing religious institutions, have expressed concerns regarding the impact and implementation of the revised agreement.

The ELN has been participating in its own peace dialogue with the government since February 2017; however, the government suspended talks after ELN attacks in January 2018. Talks were subsequently re-launched, but the new president Iván Duque suspended them once more in September 2018, one month after his inauguration. The group continues to operate across the country, is believed to be holding ten people hostage,⁴ and now controls many areas previously controlled by the FARC-EP.

The demobilisation of the FARC-EP, a lack of state presence in some rural areas, delays to the implementation of the peace agreement, and poverty have created a power vacuum that has allowed other illegal armed groups to move in and vie for territorial control. As a result, the armed conflict has intensified in some regions previously under the FARC-EP control. CSW partners have observed an increase in clashes between the ELN and other unidentified armed groups, often suspected to be neo-paramilitaries or criminal groups. These groups are aggressively struggling for control of land for the cultivation of illegal narcotics, illegal mining and other illicit economies.

In 2017 the United Nations (UN) reported 61 major displacement incidents affecting more than 12,000 people – a 22% increase compared with 2016.⁵ Killings of and threats against human rights defenders (HRDs) increased significantly. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) confirmed in their annual report, published on 3 March 2018, the murder of 121 HRDs in 2017, compared with 61 in 2016. HRDs, civil society leaders and church leaders who receive threats or are killed are usually those who challenge the presence of illegal armed groups, organised crime and illicit activities, as well as those who help victims of the internal armed conflict.

4 *Economist*, 'Colombia's new president calls off talks with a leftist insurgent group', 13 September 2018 www.economist.com/the-americas/2018/09/13/colombias-new-president-calls-off-talks-with-a-leftist-insurgent-group

5 Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2017), *Human Rights and Democracy Report 2017* www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2017

Constitutional and international commitments

Freedom of worship is guaranteed. Every person has the right to freely profess their religion and to disseminate it individually or collectively. All confessions and churches are equally free before the law.

Colombian constitution, Article 19

No one shall be subject to restrictions that might impair his freedom to maintain or to change his religion or beliefs.

American Convention on Human Rights, Pact of San Jose, Costa Rica, Article 12(2)

Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Christians in some regions, specifically conflict zones and areas controlled or contested by illegal armed groups, continue to experience moderate to severe violations of FoRB and of freedom of conscience. Pastors in the departments of Cauca and Córdoba, for example, report that the overall security situation and respect for human rights, including FoRB and freedom of conscience, remains bad or has continued to deteriorate since the peace agreement was signed in November 2016.

Freedom of assembly

In some regions illegal armed groups have prohibited or severely restricted religious activity, and in areas under their influence or control they often enforce strict rules and curfews prohibiting free movement. This results in regular infringement upon the freedom of assembly and FoRB for people in these locations.

In parts of the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia, church members report that transit is prevented between some churches after 6.30pm. Their last service is at 5pm. One church in the larger urban area of San José de Uré, in the department of Córdoba, holds a meeting from 6.30pm to 7.30pm but is prohibited from holding meetings after this time. Another church in the same area is prohibited from meeting in the evening because of the activities of neo-paramilitary groups in the region. The pastor informed CSW that illegal armed actors walk around in plain clothes, sometimes camouflage, so they are not always easily identifiable. The same pastor stated that the illegal armed groups operate several roadblocks in the area and whenever he and members of his church pass, they are searched even though the members of the illegal armed groups know who they are.

Illegal armed groups exerting control

CSW's interviews with pastors in Antioquia revealed troubling developments. As part of their strategy to bring entire communities under their authority and control, illegal armed groups have diversified their tactics. Pastors informed CSW that in most months throughout the year the groups hold obligatory community meetings. In addition, in some areas

they have advised church leaders that they must allow members of the groups into their homes: to sleep, be fed, and be referred to as a family member who has arrived to live with them. One pastor reported, "The Commander told me that I must stay and live in your house and if someone asks who I am, you must say that I am your relative, that I am a cousin, nephew, whatever it may be..." Three church leaders told CSW that they had been forced to allow a member of an illegal armed group into their home to live with them. This puts church leaders in a difficult position: if government officials or security forces come to the community the church leader is expected to lie to protect the member of the illegal armed group.

The groups have threatened that if the group member is taken away by government officials or security forces, the groups will come back for their families and remove them from the community. This is presumed to be a blanket statement threatening to forcibly displace, kidnap or assassinate them as punishment for not complying. This represents a serious security risk to religious leaders who must decide between compromising their beliefs and complying with the demands of the illegal armed groups; refusing to comply and putting their lives and those of their family members at risk; or leaving their community and losing their position as a religious leader. CSW partners do not believe these are isolated cases, but that this is part of a strategy by the illegal armed groups to increase fear and exert authority and control by putting pressure on religious leaders and other civil society leaders to leave these areas.

Emergence of new armed actors

While threats and attacks against civil society leaders, including religious leaders, have largely been made by leftist guerrilla groups such as the FARC-EP and ELN, and neo-paramilitaries, testimonies gathered by CSW evidenced a growing trend of threats and attacks committed by new unidentified armed actors. This can lead to confusion on the ground and increased fear in a civilian population which does not know where threats are coming from. This also adds to the difficulty of documenting or responding to urgent cases. In Toribio, in the department of Cauca, one Christian woman told CSW, "Each governor is threatened by armed groups, now we don't see harassment, but yes, you know there are many armed groups, and if before you knew who to speak with, now you don't know who to speak with. Now there are threats, but you don't know who is making the threats."

Although the main threats to church leaders and church members are from illegal armed groups, organised criminal groups are increasingly present in areas previously under FARC-EP control. Despite the peace agreement's National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS), which offers financial incentives to substitute illicit crops for legal alternatives, many people told CSW that the quantity of coca produced per hectare has increased since the

peace agreement. This appears to be confirmed by a report produced by the Integrated System for Monitoring Illicit Crops (SIMCI) Project of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which reports that by the end of 2017 the area of coca per hectare increased by 17%, from 146,000 ha in 2016 to 171,000 ha in 2017.⁶ 64% of the increase was seen in the departments of Antioquia, Putumayo, Norte de Santander and Cauca.

Pastors in Antioquia told CSW that the Mexican drug cartel Sinaloa is expanding its presence in parts of that region. The pastors report that the cartel is forcing people to ‘sow or go’ (*siembre, o se va*). Those who refuse to cultivate coca on account of their moral or religious beliefs risk being forcibly displaced, which is a violation of their freedom of conscience among other rights.

The growing trend of new unidentified armed actors – all responsible for serious human rights violations – expanding into territories historically controlled by the FARC-EP, and vying for control of these areas and the illicit crops cultivated there, threatens the implementation of the peace agreement and is therefore a risk to FoRB.

Attacks on religious leaders

Attacks on religious leaders across the country are widespread. A recent study by the Bogotá mayor’s office found that over the past three years 12.6% of religious leaders in Bogotá have received death threats, 4.1% have faced extortion and 3.9% have been threatened with kidnapping because of their religious activities or beliefs.⁷ During the same time period over half of the religious leaders in Bogotá reported that they had witnessed at least one case of extortion, kidnapping or threats to the life of another religious leader because of their religious activities or beliefs. Church leaders living in rural areas affected by the internal armed conflict are particularly vulnerable as they often, by default, hold a leadership role within the wider community, not just within their church; this makes them a target for illegal armed groups. Targeted leaders are usually those who challenge the presence of organised crime and illegal activities or those helping victims of the internal armed conflict.

UN reports by various Special Rapporteurs have named church representatives as a category of human rights defender under particular threat. Over the course of the 50-year conflict,

hundreds of church leaders who defied restrictions on FoRB imposed by illegal armed groups were either openly or clandestinely targeted for assassination. Many more church leaders live and work under constant threat. Over the past 20 years CSW has received reports from various parts of the country that the FARC-EP had declared Protestant pastors to be military targets. Since the signing of the peace agreement, some FARC-EP leaders admitted to a group of religious leaders that these reports were true and expressed regret for their attacks on church leaders.

While many of the FoRB violations committed by leftist guerrilla groups are rooted in anti-religious ideology, there are also pragmatic motives behind the restrictions on FoRB, motives which also underlie violations committed by neo-paramilitaries and criminal groups. All these groups operate on the basis of total control in the areas they are present, so 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.

Extortion

CSW receives regular reports that various illegal armed groups attempt to co-opt church funds by extorting churches and church leaders. One pastor reported that between 2016 and May 2018, illegal armed actors repeatedly contacted him by telephone, forcing him to make relatively large payments to top up their mobile phones. Another pastor has been receiving threats and warnings via his mobile phone since 2016, asking him when he is going to leave the region, because ‘they’ are waiting for him to do so. In June 2018 two young men whom the pastor believes to be linked to an illegal armed group came to him and demanded money for fuel. They returned on a second occasion, demanding money. A third pastor told CSW that in 2018, two members of an illegal armed group parked their motorbikes in the foyer of the church and forced the treasurer to ring the pastor because they wanted money.

Some pastors and religious leaders have refused to comply with extortion demands because of their belief that giving money to illegal armed groups from church funds is not only against the law but also contradicts their religious beliefs. This stance is extremely risky and often results in threats against the pastors and their families, and sometimes forced displacement.

Illegal armed groups recognise that targeting the families of religious leaders can be more effective than targeting the leader him or herself. One pastor told CSW that on two occasions he was compelled to pay extortion money because members of the group threatened him and his family with death. The group contacted him by mobile phone, told him the physical location of each member of his family, and said that they were following them. In May 2018 two armed men on a motorbike arrived at the pastor’s house, threw his wife to the ground and then sped away. The pastor believes that this is the group’s way of attempting to force him and his family to leave the region.

6 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), *Informe de Monitoreo de Territorios Afectados por Cultivos Ilícitos* (Spanish) www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2018/Septiembre/Informe_de_Monitoreo_de_Territorios_Afectados_por_Cultivos_Illicitos_2017_FINAL.pdf

7 Gobierno Bogotá (2018), *Política pública de libertades fundamentales de religión, culto y conciencia para Bogotá distrito capital 2018-2028* (Spanish) www.gobiernobogota.gov.co/sites/gobiernobogota.gov.co/files/documentos/politica_publica_asuntos_religiosos.pdf

Death threats

Threats made by illegal armed groups are not always limited to individuals. On 14 July 2018 a neo-paramilitary group identifying itself as the Águilas Negras threatened to kill a group of social leaders, human rights defenders, organisations and journalists.⁸ The Mennonite association Justapaz was included in the list. The Águilas Negras were also behind threats against ‘all evangelical churches’ in the cities of Barranquilla and Sincelejo in January 2015.⁹ CSW partners believe that the threat was likely issued because of the social involvement of the individuals and groups named with victims of the internal armed conflict.

In 2017 the OHCHR registered 441 attacks, including 121 killings, of which 84 were against human rights defenders with leadership roles.¹⁰ The OHCHR also recorded 41 attempted killings and 213 threats. According to the report, 64% of killings occurred in Areas Most Affected by the Conflict (ZOMAC)¹¹ and where the FARC-EP had a historical presence. According to the Colombian civil society platform Pacifista, 133 civil society leaders have been murdered in 2018 so far.

Death threats are considered to be the *modus operandi* of illegal armed groups in the department of Córdoba. In the town of Puerto Libertador there has been a reduction in the number of killings, giving the impression that the conflict has improved and that there is greater stability. However, the strategy of control has changed in these territories, with an increase in extortion known as *vacunas*¹² and other threats. In parts of Córdoba, church leaders report that the neo-paramilitary groups have more power than the police and give them their orders.

Another pattern related to threats and control is the rise of ‘drop by drop’ loans, known as *los créditos gota-gota* or *paga-paga*. *Gota a gota* was a practice frequently seen in Medellín during the 1980s, and loan shark groups were thought to be linked to criminal groups. According to InSight Crime, ‘These groups operate by offering credit to poor and working-class people who lack access to formal banking services. However, the loan sharks often charge abusively high interest rates in a practice known as “gota a gota” or “drop by drop,” named after the way in which victims are slowly bled dry of funds. When debtors can no longer pay, loan sharks may begin taking possessions and property as payment or resort to violence, according to reports.’¹³ CSW partners believe this tactic is still

occurring in the department of Córdoba and frequently ends in death threats.

Coexistence and collusion

CSW partners believe that one of the main security risks in Córdoba is collusion between illegal armed groups and the state. The presence of various state institutions dedicated to security, such as the police, the military and the SIJIN (Seccional de Policía Judicial e Investigación, Local Branch of the Judicial and Investigative Police of Colombia), in conflict zones does not solve the situation in any way, because high levels of corruption and a history of collusion between some illegal armed groups and government entities have led to extremely low levels of trust in government institutions. In certain parts of Córdoba, for example, local leaders state that they cannot report criminal activities or human rights violations to the authorities because it will immediately reach the neo-paramilitary groups. ‘They have not cut the umbilical cord with paramilitaries; for this reason, the risk for leaders is so high.’¹⁴

The peace agreement

CSW partners highlighted their concern regarding unilateral changes being made to the peace agreement and the risks that these changes present. On 28 June 2018 Congress approved the rules of procedure for the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), one of the mechanisms of the peace agreement designed to investigate and prosecute human rights violations committed during the internal armed conflict. These rules should enable this mechanism to operate effectively. However, one of the amendments included an option for members of the security forces such as the military and the police to have their cases put on hold until special chambers known as *salas especiales* are established to deal with their cases. This is in conflict with the original peace agreement signed in November 2016, which stated that all actors would be judged under equal conditions. CSW partners expressed their concern that ex-members of the FARC-EP may take up arms once again if they believe that the government is not fulfilling its side of the agreement. They also raised concerns that the government’s failure to abide by its commitments in the peace agreement may discourage other illegal armed groups, such as the ELN, from pursuing their own peace agreement. The changes to the terms of the peace agreement, alongside the presence of other illegal armed groups in areas previously controlled by the FARC-EP, has considerably slowed the implementation of the agreement.

Dialogues between FARC-EP leadership and religious groups such as CEDECOL and DiPaz have been positive and have led to breakthroughs in terms of shedding light on past actions, including the FARC-EP order designating Protestant pastors as military targets. While some of the FARC-EP leadership continues to appear committed to these dialogues, given

8 Some religious leaders expressed doubts that the group were the Águilas Negras, as the group with that name has been inactive for some time. They believe it might be a different group using the Águilas Negras name to spread confusion and fear.

9 CSW (2015), *Colombia: Freedom of religion or belief* www.csw.org.uk/2015/09/29/report/2780/article.htm

10 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Colombia (A/HRC/37/3/Add.3), 2 March 2018 www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session37/Documents/A-HRC-37-3-Add_3_EN.docx

11 Municipalities designated by Decree 1650 of 2017.

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

13 InSight Crime, ‘Colombian Loan Sharks Expanding Internationally’, 1 September 2015 www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/colombian-loan-sharks-expanding-internationally/

14 CSW interview with indigenous leader, 26 September 2017.

the high number of church leaders who were assassinated or disappeared throughout the conflict, it is expected that clarifying the circumstances of their deaths and disappearances will be a long process.¹⁵ These include cases such as those of Reverend Manuel Camacho, murdered in the Guaviare region in 2009, and Pastors Humberto Méndez and Joel Cruz García, both murdered in Huila in 2007; all three pastors had reportedly defied the FARC-EP restrictions on preaching and evangelising. Also included will be cases such as that of the three missionaries, all US citizens, who were kidnapped in 1993 and who were confirmed killed by the FARC-EP but whose remains have never been located or recovered.

Non-conflict related religious freedom problems

Indigenous communities experience severe restrictions on their religious freedom. Indigenous people who convert to Christianity are often forcibly displaced from their indigenous communities or excluded from receiving certain benefits by indigenous authorities, generally known as *cabildos*. Under the Law of Autonomy, indigenous communities are empowered to govern themselves in a traditional manner and in a way that protects their culture.

These violations are largely rooted in a 1998 Constitutional Court ruling 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, reaffirming the right of indigenous governors to prohibit the practice of 'non-traditional' religions on indigenous reserves. In some communities the traditional authorities have taken this ruling to mean that they have the authority to define what those traditional beliefs are, and to punish those who decline to profess or participate in traditional beliefs.

Conclusion

While there have been significant steps taken in terms of the conflict, especially in the form of the peace agreement signed in November 2016 between the FARC-EP and the government, there is no question that violations of human rights, including attacks on the civilian population and severe restrictions on religious freedom, continue or have grown worse in many parts of the country, as a part of the internal armed conflict.

¹⁵ These dialogues only include the church leaders targeted by the FARC-EP. Hundreds of church leaders were also targeted by the ELN as well as paramilitary, neo-paramilitary and criminal groups, and addressing these cases will be a challenge for the government and relevant illegal armed actors.

The expansion of the ELN, various neo-paramilitary groups and organised criminal groups into territories historically controlled by the FARC-EP has spread fear within the population and is linked to continued violations of FoRB.

Church leaders are the regular targets of threats, forced displacement or assassination. Illegal armed groups continue to impose severe restrictions on religious activity in many parts of the country, in some cases prohibiting it altogether. While in some areas a reduction in the number of murders gives an impression of greater stability, the strategy of control has changed in many of these territories. Illegal armed groups are diversifying their tactics, with an increase in extortion against churches and their leaders, as well as cases of members of illegal armed groups forcibly residing in pastors' homes; this, amid a growing trend of threats and attacks committed by new unidentified armed actors, has led to confusion on the ground and increased fear in the civilian population.

Despite the peace agreement's PNIS programme offering financial incentives for those who wish to substitute illicit crops for legal alternatives, many communities are being forced by criminal groups to sow coca on their land. Those who refuse to cultivate coca on account of their moral or religious beliefs risk being forcibly displaced, a violation of their freedom of conscience, along with other rights.

The growing trend of new unidentified armed actors – all responsible for serious human rights violations – expanding into territories historically controlled by the FARC-EP, and vying for control of these areas and the illicit crops cultivated there, threatens the implementation of the peace agreement.

Moreover, there is concern over unilateral changes being made to the peace agreement and the risks that these changes present. Ex-members of the FARC-EP could take up arms once again if they believe that the government is not fulfilling its side of the agreement. The government's failure to abide by its commitments in the agreement may also discourage other illegal armed groups, such as the ELN, from pursuing their own peace agreement. The changes to the terms of the peace agreement, alongside the increasing presence of other illegal armed groups in areas previously controlled by the FARC-EP, has slowed the implementation of the agreement and could have a negative impact on FoRB.

Finally, in some indigenous communities, traditional authorities continue to be responsible for attempting to force members of their communities to reconvert back to traditional beliefs and religious practices, and punishing or forcibly displacing those who refuse to do so. Indigenous communities have seen their FoRB severely curbed by the courts that have ruled in favour of traditional authorities seeking to impose religious uniformity in their communities; these communities also suffer conflict-related FoRB violations.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.