

To the President of the Republic of Colombia,

We, the undersigned, write to you to respectfully request the reversal of changes made to Decree 1066 and the National Protection System (NPS) in 2023, and the restoration of the specific protection protocol which addresses the unique needs of religious leaders.

Religious leaders have long been targets within the context of the internal armed conflict with thousands killed or forcibly displaced by illegal armed and criminal groups on all sides. In June 2022 this was finally recognised by the Colombian government, and religious leaders who received credible threats were able to access protection mechanisms available under the NPS. In 2023 and under a new presidential administration, however, a decision was made to remove religious leaders as a vulnerable population, leaving them outside the scheme and with no way to access support from the government.

The decision to remove religious leaders from the NPS was not based on any evidence that they were no longer at risk. Rather, it was made at a time in which conflicts between various illegal armed and criminal groups were spreading across the country and became particularly acute in certain regions leading to massacres and forced displacements. Civil society leaders continue to be targets of all armed actors, and religious leaders, who are often encouraging a way of life that runs contrary to the objectives of illegal and criminal armed groups, are especially vulnerable.

Government bodies tasked with monitoring human rights agree that religious leaders are at particular risk. The Office of the Ombudsman in Colombia has noted rising religious freedom violations involving the targeting of religious leaders. According to the institution, from January to September 2024, incidents infringing on the right to freedom of religion or belief increased by 31%, rising from 13 cases in 2023 to 17 in 2024.

Sadly, since December 2024, at least 11 religious leaders in regions characterised by the presence of illegal armed and criminal groups, including Guaviare and Magdalena Departments, have been assassinated, extrajudicially executed, forcibly disappeared or kidnapped. In some cases, family members of the religious leaders were killed alongside them.

We recognise that the situation in Colombia is complex. It is clear, however, that religious leaders, play an integral role in the social fabric of communities across the country. Nowhere is this more important than in areas where illegal and criminal groups are attempting to destroy social cohesion and rule of law. We believe that by ensuring that religious leaders have access to protection mechanisms, they will be more likely to remain in their communities, which in turn will make those communities more resilient.

We understand that as you take office as President of the Republic Colombia, you will have many urgent issues to which you must attend. We ask, respectfully, that restoring religious leaders to protections offered under Decree 1066, be one of your priorities.