

Introduction

Since 1958 Colombia has been home to a complex internal conflict involving far-left and far-right illegal armed groups, and government forces. On 30 November 2016 the Colombian Congress approved a peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-Army of the People (FARC-EP).

Human rights violations, including violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) are common, especially in conflict zones or areas of the country with a significant presence of illegal armed groups.

Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

The ELN has either placed harsh restrictions on religious practice or prohibited it altogether. Over the course of the 50-year conflict, hundreds of church leaders who defied these restrictions and continued to carry out their work, either openly or clandestinely, were targeted for assassination by both the ELN and the FARC-EP.

Dissidents of the FARC-EP and other armed actors – all responsible for serious human rights violations – are expanding into territories historically controlled by the FARC-EP, and vying for control of the illicit crops cultivated there. As during the 50-year conflict, groups continue to enforce strict rules prohibiting free movement in areas under their influence. This results in regular infringements of freedom of assembly and FoRB.

In parts of the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia, church members report that transit is prevented between some churches after 6.30pm.

Attacks on religious leaders

Groups on both the left and right often perceive the presence of a strong or growing church as a threat to their authority. This has led to church leaders, particularly in rural areas, being targeted in a number in an attempt to force them to cooperate; a strategy to bring entire communities under their control.

Between 2015 and 2018 12.6% of religious leaders in Bogotá received death threats, 4.1% faced extortion and 3.9% had been threatened with kidnapping because of their religious activities or beliefs. CSW has received reports that the various groups attempt to co-opt church funds by extorting churches, church leaders and church leaders' families. Religious leaders sometimes refuse to

comply with extortion demands because of their belief that these demands conflict with their religious beliefs.

In some areas illegal armed groups have ordered church leaders to allow them into their homes to live, and be referred to as a family member. 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.

Indigenous groups

FoRB violations against indigenous groups are largely rooted in a 1998 Constitutional Court ruling that upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce the observation of and participation in traditional religious beliefs and practices, on indigenous reserves.

This has led to discrimination against and corporal punishment of members of indigenous communities who hold non-traditional beliefs or none at all, and refuse to reconvert to traditional beliefs. In the worst cases they are forcibly displaced from their land and homes – all with the tacit support of the state.

Recent developments

Despite attempted dialogues with the second-largest left-wing guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), in January 2019 the government reactivated arrest warrants against the ELN's main negotiators, following a violent attack in Bogotá. On 29 August 2019 some former members of the FARC-EP announced in a video published online their decision to take up arms against the Colombian government once again. A return to open hostilities would be disastrous for human rights violations, including violations of FoRB, which have continued and even worsened in some areas despite the signing of the peace agreement four years ago.

On 10 August 2019 Pastor Plinio Rafael Salcedo was shot dead in his home in La Caucana, Tarazá Municipality, Bajo Cauca, Antioquia in an attack thought to be linked to a protest that took place two days prior to his murder. The protest gathered 1000 people from local Protestant and Catholic churches to call for the restoration of peace in the region. Pastor Salcedo led a church which is part of the Worldwide Missionary Movement denomination.

Recommendations

To the government of Colombia:

- Prioritise the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of conscience, calling for an end to all restrictions in dialogues with all actors in the conflict.
- Investigate and 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.
- Enact legislation that will protect freedom of religion or belief for all Colombians, including those living on indigenous lands.