

Over the past 60 years Colombia has experienced a complex internal conflict involving multiple illegal armed and criminal groups and government forces. Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Colombia take two main forms: violations perpetrated by illegal armed and criminal groups, often specifically targeting religious leadership; and violations against religious minorities belonging to indigenous groups. Religious minorities in indigenous groups sometimes experience both types of violations.

Over the past six months, conflict related violence in Colombia has reached levels last seen decades ago. A 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), previously the largest guerilla group in the country, was characterised by slow and inconsistent implementation and splits within the FARC as dissident factions broke away to continue fighting. A vow to pursue 'total peace' by current president, Gustavo Petro, through dialogues with any illegal armed or criminal group interested in engaging so far remains unfulfilled, with the termination of talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), now the largest guerrilla group in the country, and the group's major military offensive along the border with Venezuela resulting the mass displacement of tens of thousands of people in early 2025.

Legal framework

Colombia's constitution contains strong protections for FoRB generally. The right to conscientious objection, including due to religious beliefs, was reaffirmed in a 2014 ruling by the Constitutional Court after years of routine violations of this right by the military. FoRB violations in indigenous communities 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 FoRB cases, reaffirming the right of indigenous authorities to prohibit the practice of 'non-traditional' religions on indigenous reserves.

FoRB violations

Human rights violations, including violations of FoRB, are committed by all actors in the conflict. The ELN and FARC breakaway groups remain the two most significant historically leftist guerilla groups, but numerous new armed organised criminal groups have emerged across the country, complicating the situation, especially for civilians living in regions characterised by a significant presence of one or more illegal armed or criminal group. These groups often impose severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and movement – all of which impact FoRB – in areas under their control or influence. Over the course of the conflict, thousands of religious leaders who have defied these restrictions and continued to carry out their work, either openly or clandestinely, have been forcibly displaced or targeted for assassination.

Illegal armed and criminal groups often perceive the presence of a strong or growing church as a threat to their authority in areas under their control or influence. The content of religious leaders' sermons and community outreach and their movements are often closely monitored. Religious groups are regularly subjected to extortion in areas under the control of influence of illegal armed and criminal groups. In some cases, such groups demand active cooperation, for example, pressuring religious leaders to use their churches to launder money or to hide contraband such as weapons and narcotics. Recruitment of youth has been a particular flashpoint as illegal armed and criminal groups aggressively pursue young people and children to replenish their ranks. Religious leaders who counsel against joining or participating in the activities of an illegal armed or criminal group are at risk of being designated the enemy of the respective group.

The cost of refusing to meet the demands of illegal armed and criminal groups is high. In summer 2024 the home and church of a pastor in an urban part of northern Colombia were burnt down at the instigation of an illegal armed group. In 2024 and 2025 at least five pastors and church leaders were murdered in areas under the control or influence of illegal armed and criminal groups. In April 2025 eight individuals – seven of whom held leadership roles in two local Protestant churches in the department of Guaviare where at least two FARC dissident groups are present – were forcibly disappeared after receiving orders to attend meetings with members of an illegal armed group.

In 2023 the Colombian government removed religious leaders from an official list of categories of particularly vulnerable populations. In practice, this means that even in cases where religious leaders have received credible and serious threats, they are no longer able to access official security mechanisms and protection programs designated for those considered to be vulnerable.

Indigenous communities

Indigenous communities experience both conflict-related FoRB violations and FoRB violations committed by traditional authorities seeking to impose religious uniformity in their communities. In some communities the traditional authorities, generally known as 'cabildos', have interpreted the 1998 Constitutional Court ruling to mean that they have the authority to define what traditional beliefs are, and to punish those who decline to profess or participate in their version of the traditional beliefs. This and subsequent rulings upholding the 1998 decision have created an exception in Colombian law on FoRB. Indigenous Colombians do not enjoy the same rights as the rest of the population in contravention of Colombia's international human rights obligations, leaving religious minorities in indigenous areas without protection for their right to FoRB, or legal recourse at the national level.

Members of these communities who have converted to other religions or beliefs, and away from the religious beliefs and practices promoted by their leaders, may be

arbitrarily detained, physically punished, excluded from certain benefits, or forcibly displaced. They can also be blocked from accessing programmes for members of indigenous communities. In 2023 an association set up by a group of forcibly displaced indigenous Christians in northern Colombia was arbitrarily stripped of its status by the government. In practice, this means that young people in the displaced community must obtain the signature of the governor of the traditional indigenous governing association, which he refuses to do unless they renounce their religious beliefs.

Recommendations

To the government of Colombia:

- Restore religious leaders as a category of ‘vulnerable people’ and ensure their access to government protection programs and security mechanisms as and when necessary.
- Address restrictions on FoRB and related human rights imposed by all actors in the ongoing domestic conflict and implement security measures for communities in areas where illegal armed groups are active.
- Ensure that the Office of the Attorney-General prioritises its investigations of killings of human rights defenders, including religious leaders, and provide access to protection mechanisms for those defending FoRB and other human rights, including civil society leaders and representatives of the government at the national, state, and local levels who report and engage on attacks on or threats against religious leaders.
- Continue to pursue initiatives that will establish a lasting and just peace, ensuring that dialogues with any actor in the conflict include protections for FoRB and related rights, including freedom of conscience.
- Enact and fully implement consistent legislation that will protect freedom of religion or belief for all Colombians, including those living on indigenous lands.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Urge the government of Colombia, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of Colombia’.
- Encourage the embassy in Bogota to ensure that its interactions with the religious sector are regular and representative, actively seeking to engage with religious groups with a presence in areas with a significant presence of illegal armed or criminal groups and in indigenous communities.

- Collaborate with international partners, such as the UN and the EU, to monitor and advocate for FoRB in Colombia, ensuring that FoRB protections are integrated into peace agreements and international dialogues.
- Through UK-Colombia bilateral engagements and the FCDO’s human rights and democracy programme, advocate for FoRB protections to be embedded in all peace processes, ceasefire agreements, and regional security initiatives with non-state armed actors.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge Colombia to guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief for all in law and in practice, including for those living on indigenous lands, in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the State is party, and to champion the right to FoRB as a member of the Human Rights Council.
- Urge the OHCHR and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Colombia, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities, including those living on indigenous lands, and those seeking to defend them.
- Encourage UN Special Procedures to request country visits to Colombia and ensure that members of civil society can freely meet with them without reprisal.
- Support Colombia by ensuring peace agreements and dialogues, with all actors to the conflict, include the promotion and protection of FoRB.
- Continue to support the OHCHR and independent expert on Colombia in their work, including the provision of technical assistance and capacity-building to national and local authorities and other relevant actors in the implementation of the recommendations made by the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, with particular attention to victims.
- Urge the government of Colombia, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of Colombia’.

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T +44 (0)20 8329 0010

🐦 @CSWAdvocacy

f /CSWUK

csw.org.uk

PO Box 99

New Malden

Surrey, KT3 3YF

United Kingdom