

COLOMBIA: Mini-briefing

1. Conflict related violations of religious freedom

While many Colombians exercise their right to meet and worship freely, the daily reality for a significant percentage of Colombian Christians is very different. These men and women, particularly those living in conflict zones or areas controlled by illegal armed groups, are targeted by the armed groups because of their faith. Currently, an estimated 200 churches are believed to be forcibly closed across the country. In some regions, religious activity has been forbidden by order of the armed groups. Entire Christian communities have been displaced and church leaders have been marked for assassination. In many cases these threats have been carried out.

In 2011, the security situation in some parts of the country improved. President Santos' administration initiated important legislation pertaining to victims' rights and land reform. Unfortunately, in certain regions illegal armed groups grew in number and consolidated power over significant swathes of the country. Religious leaders in many of these areas, including Cauca, Southern Cordoba, Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta, La Guajira, and Chocó report that the overall security situation, as well as the specific issue of religious liberty, has deteriorated over the past year.

Left-wing guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) as well as neo-paramilitary groups, or 'Bacrim', fighting the government and each other for territory, specifically target church leaders and Christians. A sweeping 2010 FARC-EP order in a large area including parts of Meta, Caquetá and Guaviare forbidding all Christian activity still stands. In other parts of the country, neo-paramilitary groups have threatened and assassinated church leaders, and have ordered churches to shut down in specific locales.

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. An estimated total of 20-30 church leaders are murdered by the armed groups each year. Protestant pastors have been declared a legitimate military target by some leaders of the FARC-EP, while 2011 saw a sharp increase in the number of assassinated Catholic priests. All of the illegal armed groups, including the FARC-EP, the ELN and neo-paramilitaries, are responsible for assassinations of and threats against church leaders.

In 2011, these targeted murders continued. In February, Los Rastrojos, a neo-paramilitary group that operates across the country, opened fire on a pastor during a Sunday morning service, killing him, his nine-year old daughter, 26-year-old sister-in-law and severely wounding his nine-year old nephew. The pastor had defied an order by the group to shut down the church and stop all religious activities. In the first two weeks of September, two priests, Father Reinel Restrepo Idárraga and Father Gualberto Oviedo Arrieta, were found murdered in the provinces of Caldas and Chocó respectively, raising the total of assassinated Catholic priests in the first nine months of the year to six.

In addition to these targeted assassinations, many more church leaders were forcibly displaced while others live and work under constant threat. In late December, Pastor Salvador Alcántara, was forced into hiding after receiving death threats from masked men, believed to be members of a neo-paramilitary group operating in Southern Bolívar. Pastor Alcántara is a target because of his leadership of the El Garzal community which has repeatedly been threatened with mass forced displacement by paramilitary groups linked to the drug lord Manuel Enrique Barreto, alias “Don Pedro” who claims the land as his own.

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 refuse to join 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 armed groups’ 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.

2. CSW Recommends:

That the government of Colombia:

- Take the lead in guaranteeing respect for the rights associated with religious freedom. This includes ensuring that these rights, as set out in Colombia’s Constitution as well as in the American Convention on Human Rights (San Jose 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 anyone working on behalf of the Colombian 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 and conscience;
- Through the offices of the Attorney General, initiate and carry out investigations into assassinations, attacks and threats made against church leaders, including cases of forced disappearance, and offer adequate protection and security for witnesses and others who denounce human rights violations;
- Add church leaders to the category of ‘vulnerable groups’ along with trade unionists, journalists and human rights defenders and affording them the security mechanisms that this implies;

That the United States:

- Urge the Colombian Government to comply with all of the above recommendations and to raise these concerns at every available opportunity;
- Continue to closely monitor the religious freedom situation in Colombia through the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom and the State Department Office for International Religious Freedom and to ensure that this is a key element to any assessment of the overall human rights situation;

- To instruct its representatives in the US Embassy in Bogota to establish and maintain an open dialogue with representatives of different faith groups, in order to monitor the impact of the conflict on religious freedom.

That the European Union:

- Urge the Colombian Government to comply with all of the above recommendations and to raise these concerns at every available opportunity;
- As the Colombian Government and any of the armed groups explore a possible peace process, 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;
- Continue its efforts to engage with representatives of civil society in Colombia, emphasising its commitment to support human rights defenders under the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, and ensure that it incorporates into its dialogues the representatives of different faith organisations;
- With regard to the EU Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflict, seek ways to improve support for the rehabilitation of child soldiers and increase assistance to agencies and organisations that aid children fleeing forced recruitment by the armed groups. The EU should put pressure on the Colombian Government to ensure that Colombian security forces cease recruitment of juveniles as runners and informants;
- With regard to the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, should instruct its representations in Colombia including EU Delegation and EU member state embassies to continue to reach out to civil society groups 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 in volatile regions are particularly vulnerable but also the least likely to be aware of these policies and to seek ways to address this problem.