

COLOMBIA: Summary of Concerns and Recommendations

I. Summary of concerns

Religious persecution is rarely associated with Colombia. Internationally known mega-churches and rapid church growth over the past decades have contributed to a widespread perception held both in and outside of the country that religious persecution does not exist. However, while many Christians in Colombia 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, but also many living in the supposed safety of major urban areas, suffer direct persecution because of their faith. Across the country an estimated 200 churches are believed to be forcibly closed. In some regions, religious activity has been forbidden by order of the armed groups. Entire Christian communities have been displaced and pastors and church leaders have been marked for assassination. In many cases these threats have been carried out.

Work as a church leader, pastor or priest, carries particular danger. While Protestant pastors have been declared a legitimate military target by some leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), all of the illegal armed groups, including the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and right-wing neo-paramilitary groups are responsible for assassinations of and threats against church leaders. An estimated 25-30 pastors are murdered by the armed groups each year. Many more have been forcibly displaced while others live and work under constant threat.

In addition to these more direct forms of persecution, Christians 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, which they find incompatible with their faith, often face horrific and inhumane consequences. The majority of 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.

Violations of religious freedom on indigenous reserves, though of a different nature, are also serious. Colombian courts have ruled, in contravention of Colombia's international human rights obligations, that, when it comes to religious freedom, indigenous Colombians do not have the same rights as the rest of the population. This has resulted in indigenous Christians being subjected to discrimination, corporal punishment and, in the worst cases, banishment from their lands for refusing to reconvert back to traditional beliefs – all with the tacit support of the state.

2. Summary of recommendations

- As part of 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 includes the Evangelical Church, through the auspices of the Colombian Council of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL) along with the Roman Catholic Church in its dialogues, taking note of the devastating impact that the violence continues to have on this part of the population, which has a significant presence across the country and particularly in the conflict zones. Particular attention should be paid to the situation of priests, pastors and other church leaders who are targeted and/or threatened by the various armed groups;
- With regard to the Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflict, the EU should also seek ways to improve support for the rehabilitation of child soldiers and increase assistance to agencies and organisations that seek to aid children fleeing forced recruitment by the armed groups;
- With regard to the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, the EU representations in Colombia (including both the EU Delegation and EU member state representations) should 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 seek ways to address this problem.
- Furthermore the EU should apply the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders to religious leaders who come under threat, taking note of the role that many of church leaders play as community leaders and human rights defenders in their communities;
- The EU should seek ways to support any eventual peace process and push all parties to incorporate the concerns and rights of the victims of human rights atrocities committed by both sides into any peace agreement.