

Introduction

1. CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) is a human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all. This submission seeks to bring the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC's) attention to the ongoing situation of human rights, including FoRB, in Colombia.

Challenges to FoRB in Colombia's Legal Framework

2. There are a variety of legal protections for FoRB contained within Colombia's constitution, including the right to conscientious objection due to religious beliefs, which was reaffirmed in a 2014 ruling by the Constitutional Court, after years of routine violations of this right by the military.
3. However, the Colombian courts have ruled that these FoRB protections as provided for in the constitution and international law do not extend to those living on indigenous lands where collective cultural rights take precedence. Therefore, FoRB violations in indigenous communities are largely rooted in a 1998 Constitutional Court ruling which, in a split judgment, upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce the observation of and participation in traditional religious beliefs and practices on indigenous reserves.
4. Although there has been ample documentation of a pattern of attacks on communities of faith and their faith leaders throughout Colombia's decades-long internal conflict, the religious sector was excluded from the 2011 Law of Victims as a specific category of the population that was collectively affected. The legislation was introduced by President Juan Manuel Santos aiming to return stolen and abandoned land to internally displaced Colombians and provide reparations to victims of human rights violations.¹ The exclusion of religious groups in the Victim Law legislation renders faith leaders and minorities without legal protection despite widespread FoRB violations.
5. Furthermore, in 2023, the Colombian government amended Decree 1066 removing religious leaders as a category of at high-risk individual with the right to access protection programmes. Decree 1066 also known as the 'Sole Regulatory Decree of the Administrative Sector of the Interior' was introduced in 2015.² It is one of various legal instruments under which the Colombian government must implement and provide specific protective security measures to certain categories of high-risk individuals, communities and organisations. The amendment of the Decree in recent

years has rendered religious leaders vulnerable and void of specific protection.

Context of FoRB in Colombia

6. Despite the 2016 peace agreement, illegal armed and criminal groups continue to maintain a significant presence in many parts of the country. Recently, there has been extreme violence and mass displacements in the northeastern part of the country, where illegal armed groups are fighting each other for control. Groups adhering to an extreme leftist political ideology have placed harsh restrictions on religious practice or prohibited it altogether in areas they control or have strong influence, while right-wing neo-paramilitary and criminal groups also impose severe restrictions on religious practices, including threatening leaders of churches who refuse to cooperate with them.
7. Illegal armed and criminal groups often view the presence of a strong or growing religious community as a threat to their authority. The values and actions promoted by religious leaders are often viewed by illegal armed and criminal groups as in opposition to their objectives. Religious leaders are often targeted as part of a strategy used to bring entire communities under control. Illegal armed and criminal groups regularly extort churches, religious leaders and their families and impose restrictions on or forbid the right to assembly and movement, which can negatively affect the ability of members of religious communities to meet for religious meetings and activities. Religious leaders who refuse to comply with such demands and those who advocate for human rights can face threats and in some cases violence, or death.
8. There has been a concerning rise in FoRB violations over the past year. According to the Office of the Ombudsman in Colombia, between January and 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 2024.³ Death threats saw a staggering 50% increase, from four cases in 2023 to eight in 2024. The true number of cases is likely much higher as many cases go underreported due to a lack of confidence in the authorities' management of the information.
9. The intentional removal of religious groups and leaders from national protection programmes in Colombia has made them even more vulnerable in an increasingly hostile and violent context.

FoRB violations against religious leaders

10. One notable case is that of the targeted assassination of a Protestant pastor alongside his family in northern

1 Human Rights Watch, 'Colombia: Victims Law a Historic Opportunity', 10 June 2011 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/10/colombia-victims-law-historic-opportunity>

2 Oidhaco, 'The Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Social Leaders and Communities in Colombia', 30 September 2024 https://www.oidhaco.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Oidhaco_Human-Rights-Defenders.pdf

3 Defensoría del Pueblo, 'Vulneraciones al derecho de libertad religiosa aumentaron un 31% entre enero y septiembre de 2024', 30 October 2024 <https://www.defensoria.gov.co/-/vulneraciones-al-derecho-de-libertad-religiosa-aumentaron-un-31-entre-enero-y-septiembre-de-2024>

Colombia on 29 December 2024.⁴ Pastor Marlon Lora and his family were eating lunch in Aguachica, Cesar Department following a Sunday morning religious service when armed gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire instantly killing Pastor Lora, his wife and daughter. His son was severely injured and died in hospital. Pastor Lora held a leadership role overseeing 35 urban and rural churches across Cesar and Santander, frequently travelling to support these congregations.

11. In another recent case, on 8 January 2025, a second Protestant Christian church leader died after being shot six times in northern Colombia.⁵ Iván García, a 28-year-old church leader was walking home along a rural road with his 14-year-old stepdaughter and six other people following a religious service when two individuals on a motorcycle, stopped dismounted and opened fire on the church leader, before fleeing.
12. Further cases also outline the reality for religious leaders living in areas with a significant presence of illegal armed and criminal groups in Colombia. On 13 November 2024, brothers Everand Gerson García Vélez, active members of a faith community in Valle del Cauca were murdered by three men on their own farm.⁶ On 11 November, evangelical pastor Salvador Zapateiro Mercado was killed under suspicious and unexplained circumstances in Cartagena while watching a football match at a local shop.⁷ On 14 August, the home of pastoral couple Rodian Rodriguez and Kelly Medina was set on fire by neighbours who were unhappy about the religious gatherings they held outside their residence in Santa Marta city, north of Colombia.⁸
13. These acts of violence are part of a larger context of increasing threats to religious leaders. On 30 December 2024, a group of 19 evangelical pastors filed a complaint with the Aguachica municipal government regarding death threats targeting the wives of pastors in the city communicated via telephone to a female pastor in the region.⁹ At least six pastors of churches with over 100 members have personally received calls threatening and/or exhorting them. Out of fear, many of them have not spoken publicly about this, nor have they filed complaints. Some have chosen to leave the region, at least temporarily, out of concerns for their safety.

14. The Colombian government's decision to unilaterally remove religious leaders' access to special protection schemes is unconscionable in a context of increased instability and violence in many parts of the country. For decades, religious leaders have been specifically and systematically targeted by illegal armed and criminal groups, and thousands have lost their lives as a result. Specific protection protocols addressing the unique needs of religious leaders in Colombia are urgently needed along with the restoration of religious leaders in the National Protection System.

Recommendations

To the government of Colombia:

15. Amend Decree 1066 to include a specific protection protocol which addresses the unique needs for religious leaders in Colombia and reinstate the inclusion of religious leaders in Colombia, and reinstate the inclusion of religious leaders in the National Protection System as a matter of urgency.
16. Ensure that the Office of the Attorney-General prioritises its investigations of murders of human rights defenders, including religious leaders.
17. Address restrictions on FoRB imposed by all actors in the ongoing domestic conflict and implement security measures for communities in areas where illegal armed groups extort and threaten religious and community leaders and impose restrictions on FoRB.

To the UN Human Rights Council:

18. Adopt a coordinated approach with other UN agencies and international institutions to ensure that in all resolutions, dialogues and exchanges with Colombia human rights are raised and demands made that Colombia fulfils its human rights obligations.
19. Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Independent Expert on Colombia, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Colombia and the specific vulnerabilities faced by religious leaders.

4 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Colombia: Pastor and family attacked after Sunday service', 30 December 2024 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/12/30/press/6405/article.htm>

5 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Colombia: Another Protestant church leader assassinated', 14 January 2025 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2025/01/14/press/6409/article.htm>

6 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Colombia: Pastor and family attacked after Sunday service', 30 December 2024 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/12/30/press/6405/article.htm>

7 Ibid.,

8 Ibid.,

9 FoRB in Full, 'We go into the streets in fear: Christians in Northern Colombia no longer feel safe', 17 January 2025 <https://forbinfull.org/2025/01/17/we-go-into-the-streets-with-fear-after-the-murders-of-two-pastors-christians-in-northern-colombia-no-longer-feel-safe/>

