

## Introduction

1. CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) and Impulso 18 are human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all. This submission to Colombia's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) focuses on violations of the right to FoRB and other intersecting rights during the reporting period.
2. Colombia is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS), has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and is party to a number of other international human right treaties.
3. Many citizens participate in religious activities on a regular basis without any hindrance. A significant percentage, however, is subjected to consistent and serious violations of their right to FoRB, including freedom of conscience, despite strong protections of FoRB in the Colombian constitution (Article 19) and in international treaties to which the state is party.
4. FoRB violations in the country take two main forms: those perpetrated by armed groups which often specifically targeting religious leaders, and violations against religious minorities belonging to indigenous groups.
5. Regrettably, during the third cycle of the UPR, Colombia only received one recommendation pertaining to the right to FoRB and freedom of conscience, which was noted. The recommendation called on Colombia to 'Establish an independent and impartial application and decision-making procedure for implementing the right to conscientious objection to military service.'<sup>1</sup>

## FoRB and the Peace Agreement

6. Since 1958 Colombia has experienced a complex internal conflict involving multiple far-left and far-right illegal armed groups, criminal 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), a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group.
7. From 2016 to 2017, during the first year of the implementation of the Peace Agreement, targeted violence related to religion or belief seemed to decrease. However, during the reporting period, numbers have risen once again, especially since 2019. The government administration led by President Iván Duque Márquez

between 2018 to 2022 consistently slowed down the implementation process. According to various sources the number of violent FoRB related incidents during the past five years may exceed 340 cases.<sup>2</sup> Illegal armed and criminal groups continue to hold significant influence or control in parts of the country. Attacks on religious leaders have continued, including threats, assassinations, harassment, deprivation of liberty and forced displacement. In addition, the vandalism of religious buildings, and the forced recruitment of the children of religious leaders into illegal armed groups were used to coerce religious leaders.

8. The increase in FoRB violations perpetrated by Organised Armed Groups (GAO) against religious leaders is in line with the increase in the number of municipalities where they are present, which grew between 2016 and 2022 from 376 to 526 municipalities.<sup>3</sup> The GAO are made up of FARC dissident groups or other groups, including the National Liberation Army (ELN) which holds an ideology based on Marxist-Leninism and liberation theology, and the narco-paramilitaries of Gaitanistas Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), both of which are the main perpetrators of human rights violations, including of the right to FoRB. These groups also continue to enforce strict rules prohibiting freedom of expression and free movement in areas under their influence, resulting in regular infringements of the rights to FoRB, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association, in violation of Articles 18, 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) respectively.
9. For example, in May 2022 a pastor in Pueblo Nuevo, Arauca, was forbidden by the ELN to visit places in the rural areas of Pueblo Nuevo. They were allowed in the town if they did not carry out religious activities. Several pastors reported being restricted to preaching only inside their church buildings. Two men belonging to an ELN guerrilla group said that pastors should not share their faith outside the church, stating that the ideology of Christian evangelicals is not compatible with the revolution.
10. Despite the targeted nature of attacks against religious or belief communities by GAO, the final report of the Colombia Truth Commission<sup>4</sup>, presented on 28 June 2022, outlines the events that gave rise to almost six decades of internal armed conflict in Colombia. Unfortunately, the Commission did not include any reference to violations against individuals based on religion or belief.

1 United Nations, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Colombia, 9 July 2018, [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/39/6](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/39/6)

2 The Observatory of Religious Freedom in America Latina, Violent incidents database records from 1 January 2018-1 April 2023. Last accessed 1 April 2023, <https://olire.org/monitor/violent-incidents-database/>

3 Indepaz, Report: 'Desafío a la paz total', 22 February 2023 [https://indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/INFORME\\_GRUPOS\\_FINAL\\_NOV28.pdf](https://indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/INFORME_GRUPOS_FINAL_NOV28.pdf)

4 In Spanish, 'Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No repetición (CEV)'; <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad>

## Under reporting of FoRB violations

11. According to the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC) and the Attorney Office, only six FoRB violations were reported in 2022 and no one was convicted of a crime involving FoRB between 2018-2022.
12. Even after the Peace Agreement, fear has prevented the reporting of countless incidents involving FoRB violations due to the presence of local and/or regional power groups such as the ELN, OAGs and break-away FARC groups, together with high levels of infiltration and corruption in regional and local governments.
13. FoRB cases also remain underreported due to a lack of understanding of the right on the part of those affected, or misrepresentation by the perpetrators of FoRB violations about what constitutes a FoRB violation in accordance with Colombia's penal code. This includes 'crimes against religious feeling and respect for the deceased' as outlined in articles 201, 202, 203, 204<sup>5</sup>. According to the article 202 'Whoever disturbs or prevents the celebration of a ceremony or religious function of any permitted cult, will incur a fine'.
14. In one example, no complaint was filed after five church leaders were beaten and tortured and local authorities forcibly closed an indigenous church Iglesia Cristiana Evangelica Nasa (ICEN) on the Aguada San Antonio Caldon Reserve in Cauca in December 2021. In June 2022, the authorities beat up five leaders of the same church, three of whom were among those mistreated the previous year. The traditional authorities defended the closure of the church and attacks on the members of the religious minority as necessary to maintain harmony. Complaints about the violations are blocked or ignored by the authorities on the indigenous reserves.
15. In August 2022, the Minister of Justice proposed major judicial reform to address the chronic overcrowding of prisons and outline a more humane criminal policy aimed at strengthening fundamental rights. However, the proposed reforms would also repeal articles in the penal code related to religious sentiment and the desecration of graves. According to opposition members of Congress and religious leaders, these sections do not contribute to the overall objective of the project but will instead leave religious or belief communities vulnerable to violations and completely unprotected by the law.
16. GAO often perceive the presence of a strong or growing religious community as a threat to their authority. This is particularly so in rural areas, where religious leaders are targeted to force them to cooperate with the armed groups as part of a strategy used to bring entire communities under the control of the GAO. CSW has received reports that GAOs attempt to co-opt church funds by extorting churches, leaders and their families. Religious leaders sometimes refuse to comply with extortion demands because of these demands conflict with their religious beliefs and GAO often respond to such refusals with threats or violent attacks.
17. In some areas GAO have ordered church leaders to allow members of the GAO 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 GAO member.
18. Religious leaders in areas with a significant presence of GAOs often feel a responsibility to their larger community and prioritize the prevention of stigmatisation or violent attacks on the community. As a result, many religious leaders practice self-censorship especially in their preaching to young people in regard to non-participation in GAOs and avoid any comment on theological views on political participation.
19. Neo-paramilitary armed groups like the AGC frequently attack religious leaders who oppose their criminal activities and expansion. In the zone of Cauca, Antioquia, at least three pastors were murdered in 2018 and 2019:
20. Pastor Efren Enriquez Martínez Perez, age 55, was assassinated on 16 September 2018, before a religious meeting that he was planning to lead. Pastor Martínez Pérez led the Nueva Filadelfia Church of Association of Evangelical Churches of the Caribbean (AIEC). A member of the community told CSW partners that: "[Martínez Pérez] would confront [the neo-paramilitary group], they would always approach him to tell him that they had arrived to protect the community, that only they could do it, he would reply saying that the community did not need this form of protection." After calling Pastor Martínez out of his home, the men reportedly said: "As you are a pastor, we will only shoot you once". One of the men then shot and killed the pastor in front of his home.
21. On 9 February 2019 in Cauca, 24-year-old pastor, Leider Molina was shot five times and killed after giving a sermon in his church.<sup>6</sup> He was targeted because of his work, which included preaching to young people and urging them to stay away from drug trafficking and violence.
22. Pastor Plinio Salcedo from the WMM Church of Bajo Cauca in Cauca, was shot to death on 10 August 2019. He was targeted because of his involvement in a peaceful demonstration that took place two days prior, when around 1000 people from local Protestant and Roman Catholic churches gathered to call for the restoration of peace in the region.

## Attacks on religious leaders

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<sup>5</sup> Departamento Administrativo de la Función Pública, Ley 599 de 2000, page 42, Ley-599-de-2000-Gestor-Normativo ([funcionpublica.gov.co](http://funcionpublica.gov.co))

<sup>6</sup> Puertas Abiertas, 'Pastor de 24 años es asesinado en Colombia', 6 February 2019, <https://puertasabiertas.org/cristianos-perseguidos-noticias/pastor-de-24-anos-es-asesinado-en-colombia>

23. Different incidents against religious leaders took place in the southwest region of Colombia:
24. For example, in July 2019, a group of six Christians who went to Buenaventura to participate in a religious workshop were kidnapped and forcibly disappeared by a GAO. In a separate incident in July 2019 Pastor Norbey Gongora was arbitrarily detained for three hours by members of a GAO by order of their commander.<sup>7</sup> In Buenaventura, the GAOs monitor all travel by river and in this case and had been aware that the pastor was traveling by boat. Christians in the region perceived by GAOs as allies of the government because they do not cultivate illicit crops, and do not support GAOs.
25. According to CSW sources, a Christian pastor in Valle del Jamundí was murdered on 1 May 2020, in an indigenous zone in Valle del Cauca. The pastor had reportedly disobeyed orders to close the place of worship and had publicly expressed his disagreement with GAOs.
26. In 2022, three Christian social leaders who were active in their churches and faith-based social work were killed, including Luz Marina Arteaga<sup>8</sup>, a member of the Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation who was murdered in January, and Ever Ortega<sup>9</sup>, a worker of the Jesuit Refugee Service, in Norosi, Bolívar, who was murdered in May. These murders are believed to have been carried out as “punishment” for their work with communities and in defence of human rights. The third social leader, Jesús Antonio Montaña<sup>10</sup>, an indigenous Christian leader from the Misak community in Corinto, Cauca, was assassinated after he denounced harassment of the population by guerrilla groups present in the region, including FARC dissident groups, the Segunda Marquetalia and the ELN who were pressuring the population to vote for Gustavo Petro. After the pastor denounced the harassment, he was forcibly disappeared; on 13 June his body was found in the city of Popayan. Montaña had a long history of harassment at the hands of guerrillas and the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC) due his work promoting Christian principles through his social work and denouncing discrimination against members of religious minorities in the region.

## Threats against and harassment of religious leaders

27. In 2020, the Attorney General's Office, through the Directorate of Human Rights, reported 17 investigations into attacks on religious leaders in just one city, Bucaramanga, Santander, a significant increase in the number of investigations in comparison to the previous year.<sup>11</sup> The incidents included threats via pamphlets and phone calls, including death threats towards religious leaders and their families who were warned on 8 December 2020 that they should leave the city in order to avoid being killed.
28. In 2020, during the pandemic, in Bajo Cauca, Antioquia, [a subregion of the Department of Antioquia] a Protestant pastor who was targeted by members of the Gulf Clan neo-paramilitary group ‘had to be relocated after one of her children was targeted with threats and sexual violence’<sup>12</sup>. The pastor is the leader of a Victims' Associations Project [one of several ran by the Mennonite peace and justice NGO, Justapaz] as well as a leader in their Peace Sanctuary Church (ISP) project.
29. In early 2021, Roman Catholic bishop Ruben Dario Jaramillo received death threats after denouncing the situation of violence and corruption in Buenaventura.
30. In Arauca, on 17 July 2019, Pastor Reinaldo Mayorca, shared Christian literature with members of the ELN. On several occasions, the armed group ordered him not to continue with this work. When the pastor refused to stop, the group threatened him with death and forcibly displaced him from the region.
31. In October 2019, a Protestant pastor<sup>13</sup> in Tuluá, Valle del Cauca, not far from Buenaventura, escaped death, after a hired hitman regretted having confessed to him two murders committed the day before. The pastor was forced to flee that same day to another city with his wife and their two minor children.
32. In July 2021, in the department of Norte de Santander, the ELN attacked the properties of two religious leaders. In Hacarí, the ELN attacked a priest's house and vehicle during a raid. The priest Andrey Fajardo,<sup>14</sup> parish priest of the San Miguel Arcángel church, was left unharmed although his vehicle was destroyed due to the damage

7 The Observatory of Religious Freedom in America Latina, Violent incidents database records from July 2019. Last accessed 1 April 2023, <https://olire.org/monitor/violent-incidents-database/>

8 Corporación Claretiana, ‘Asesinada la lideresa Luz Marina Arteaga Henao’, 20 January 2022 <https://corporacionclaretiana.org/2022/01/20/asesinada-la-lideresa-luz-marina-arteaga/>

9 Manos Unidas, ‘Matan en Colombia a un colaborador del Servicio Jesuita de Refugiados’ 9 May 2022, <https://www.manosunidas.org/noticia/ever-ortega-colombia>

10 Telesurenglish.net, ‘Indepaz: Another indigenous social leader killed in Colombia’, 14 June 2022, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Indepaz-Another-Indigenous-Social-Leader-Killed-in-Colombia-20220614-0017.html>

11 Vanguardia.com, ‘Amenazan a pastores y a otros líderes religiosos de la zona Norte de Bucaramanga’, 8 December 2020, <https://www.vanguardia.com/area-metropolitana/bucaramanga/amenazan-a-pastores-y-a-otros-lideres-religiosos-de-la-zona-norte-de-bucaramanga-IN3186857>

12 ForB in Full: A blog by CSW, ‘Colombia: planting seeds of hope amid conflict and covid-19’, 1 December 2020, <https://forbinfull.org/2020/12/01/colombia-planting-seeds-of-hope-amid-conflict-and-covid-19/#more-4908>

13 ForB in Full, a blog by CSW, ‘En la línea de fuego frente a la LdRC salimos de la ciudad para no volver’, 7 October 2019, <https://forbinfull.org/2019/10/07/en-la-linea-de-fuego-frente-a-la-ldrc-salimos-de-la-ciudad-para-no-volver/#more-4267>

14 RCN Radio, ‘Iglesia y casa curial del municipio de hacari fueron atacadas con explosivos’, 4 July 2021, <https://www.rcnradio.com/colombia/santanderes/iglesia-y-casa-curial-del-municipio-de-hacari-fueron-atacadas-con-explosivos>

to its doors and windows. In Teorema, the ELN marked the initials of the group on the car of a pastor's son who was visiting from the village of La Llana. The young Christian had gone to visit another pastor from a nearby municipality. He had to leave at dawn, before sunrise so that the large marking was not evident to other GAOs in the area.

33. At the beginning of 2021, the pastoral family of the Alianza church in Bocas de Satinga, Tumaco, moved to a nearby town due to threats against the pastor because of religious activities he organised despite the prohibitions by illegal armed groups.
34. On 17 August 2021, Methodist pastor Luis Miguel Caviedes Moreno denounced a series of threats and intimidations for exercising his pastoral work in support of communities within the framework of the National Strike in Cali city.<sup>15</sup> He said that in one incident, while he was talking with spokesmen from the demonstration point from a motorcycle, two men dressed in grey fired firearms at the place where he was talking. Later he received different kinds of threats and warnings.

### Recruitment of religious leaders' children as pressure point

35. Between 2018 and 2022, another way in which GAOs attempted to pressurise religious leaders especially those with families into stopping their work with young people, thereby discouraging them from participating in illegal activities, was to target the leader's children for forced recruitment either as combatants or informants.
36. For example, the son of Pastor Rafael Alvarez in Puerto Colombia, Guainia, was threatened with forced recruitment repeatedly by the ELN and the AGC. The constant tension experience by the family, together with the death threats to the pastor, because of his work led to the family's decision to flee the area in July 2018.
37. On 9 March 2020, in Bajo Cauca, Antioquia, the twelve-year-old daughter of a pair of church leaders, who was herself an active participant in the church, was abducted by a GAO leader. The man held her for five days and sexually abused her until the minor's father managed to negotiate her release with the help of a superior GAO leader.
38. Leaders of the AIEC church in El Pato, Antioquia, received threats in October 2020, after they expressed, in their pastoral role, their opposition to the relationship of the daughter of one of their members with the leader of the GAO operating in the area.<sup>16</sup>

### Extortion

39. During the first half of 2020, 28 cases of extortion <sup>17</sup>targeting Protestant Christians were registered in the

regions of Buenaventura (7) Bajo Cauca (6) Arauca (4) Chocó (2) Huila (1) Catatumbo (2) Cauca (1) Bolívar (2) Cesar (1) Tumaco (1). In Buenaventura the GAOs blamed the Christian targets of extortion for the capture of members of the armed groups and the retention of drug shipments.

40. According to CSW sources, GAO operating in Buenaventura attempted to extort money from a pastor on two occasions in March 2021. A young man was sent by the criminal leader to demand the payment of a significant amount of protection money to enable the pastor to continue to move freely preaching between various sectors of the city. The pastor refused to pay the protection money, and as a result their family is under pressure due to high levels of powerful criminal activity in the city.
41. During the year-long national strikes beginning in April 2021, many religious leaders reported being forced by GAOs to pay fines in support of the strikes. In one example GAOs visited a pastor in Norte de Santander, to demand that he expressed his support for and participated in the strikes and threatened him with a fine if he did not. For reasons of conscience, the pastor did not comply with the GAO demands and was forced to pay the fine. Several days later, the group visited the pastor again and threatened him with death if he did not go out to support the strike. This time, out of fear, the pastor participated.
42. In another example, a Protestant church in San Juan de Lozada was extorted by FARC dissidents. The GAO demanded that each family pay a fee to support the national strike. In early July 2021, the pastor was made to pay 500,000 pesos for the supposed debt owed by the church, based on the number of families who worship there.

### Forced displacement

43. Throughout 2022, the war between ELN and FARC dissidents has provoked the forced displacement of 60 Christian families from churches in the villages belong to Arauquita municipality in Arauca department: Aguachica, La Victoria, San Miguel, Rosablanca, La Pica, Carretero, Campamento, Bocas del Juju and La Ceiba all in the municipality of Arauquita.
44. According to Pastor Frank Tapias of the Centro Misionero Evangélico (CEM) church in Pueblo Nuevo, Arauquita, where there are 15 evangelical churches, an additional 1,000 members have also been forced to leave because the churches are closely monitored by the illegal armed groups and those who fled feared that they would be accused of informing to the other group and killed if they remained.

15 ALC Communication, 'Continúa la situación de riesgo en contra del pastor Luis Miguel Caviedes', 18 August 2021, <https://alc-noticias.net/es/2021/08/18/continua-la-situacion-de-riesgo-en-contra-del-pastor-luis-miguel-caviedes/>

16 The Observatory of Religious Freedom in America Latina, Violent incidents database records from 2020. Last accessed 1 April 2023, <https://olire.org/monitor/violent-incidents-database/>

17 Ibid

45. Between 2 and 3 June 2020, a total of 14 people were displaced from La Caucana in Taraza, Antioquia after GAOs gave a pastor and his entire family, who lived in the village a 48-hour ultimatum to leave because of his work sharing his faith in the area.
46. On 12 December 2020, a motorcycle bomb exploded in front of a Protestant Christian church in Tame, Arauca, as a police patrol passed by. The structure of the church suffered damages. The pastor understood the attack to be a warning message from the GAO to the pastor of the affected church, who subsequently fled the area to another city.
47. In 2021, a family of Christian leaders in the Juan XXIII neighbourhood, an area of Buenaventura heavily influenced by GAOs, was threatened and subsequently fled the area. The family appears to have been targeted because of their visibility and acceptance among the youth of the sector and the impact they were having in sharing their faith.
48. In May 2021, in Barbacoas and Magüi Payán, Nariño Department, there were mass displacements of the population due to the intensification of armed territorial conflict.<sup>18</sup> Although there are no exact figures due to the magnitude of the situation, pastors in the area have reported that approximately 130 Christians were affected.
49. Due to the territorial dispute between the ELN and the Clan del Golfo, the Nueva Jerusalem Embera community in Choco, department, was displaced on 23 January 2021. 38 Christian families have been seriously affected as they have no way to meet their basic needs and live in overcrowded conditions in the community that welcomed them. Due to the armed confrontations, the group are seriously affected psychologically, especially the children and the elderly. They have received humanitarian assistance by different NGOs, but no satisfactory support from the government.
50. The violent confrontations between GAO, as well as the forced displacements, affect FoRB because parishioners are unable to congregate freely in the churches sometimes leading to church closures. On 24 March 2021, in the village Cachicamo, Guaviare, FARC dissidents

forcibly closed the Worldwide Missionary Movement Church. Local Christians have been prohibited from meeting because the GAO accuse them of using religious activities as a cover to mobilise in various areas and give information to the authorities.<sup>19</sup>

## Discrimination

51. In June 2019, two marine captains interrupted a Protestant religious celebration and ordered the indefinite closure of the non-Roman Catholic religious services within the Cartagena Naval School for Petty Officers. The meetings had started with 20 young people in 2017 and ended with approximately 70 actively involved. The order was only applied to the evangelical group but Roman Catholic Mass led by priests in the same school and at the same time continue to take place without hindrance. Similar incidents have been reported in other military units, where officers say that cannot identify with any faith or none, except Roman Catholicism, because they will face different reprisals, including impediments to promotion and discrimination in job growth opportunities.

## Vandalism of places of worship

52. Places of worship have been targeted for illegal fines by GAO while sacred objects have been destroyed by extremist groups who oppose societal positions held by Roman Catholic and some Protestant churches. This included graffiti, as well arson attacks and the destruction of furniture and has taken place mainly in large urban areas.
53. In one example, in La Vega, Caqueta GAOs attempted to stop religious believers from meeting by cutting the electricity to church buildings in 2018 and 2019.
54. In another example, during a vigil on 6 December 2020, the Foursquare Gospel Church in Campo Duro, Santander was consumed by fire after an arson attack thought to be carried out by neo-paramilitaries. GAO have been the protagonists of innumerable thefts of sacred objects of patrimonial value and others such as money and equipment used in religious services.<sup>20</sup> Such acts, in many cases including recurring thefts, have been reported in many cities across the country, including

18 OCHA Humanitarian Response, 'Alerta por desplazamiento masivo zona rural del municipio de magüi', last accessed 1 April 2023, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/colombia/document/alerta-por-desplazamiento-masivo-zona-rural-del-municipio-de-mag%C3%BC>

19 The Observatory of Religious Freedom in America Latina, Violent incidents database records from 2021. Last accessed 1 April 2023, <https://olire.org/monitor/violent-incidents-database/>

20 Infobae, 'Capturaron a responsables de millonario robo en Iglesia de chipaque Cundinamarca', 14 September 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/09/14/capturaron-a-responsables-de-millonario-robo-en-iglesia-de-chipaque-cundinamarca/>

Bogota, Barranquilla<sup>21</sup>, Bucaramanga<sup>22</sup>, Cauca<sup>23</sup>, Cundinamarca<sup>24</sup>, Tolima<sup>25</sup>, Valle del Cauca<sup>26</sup>, and others.

55. In departments such as Antioquia, Guajira, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Arauca, Caquetá, Córdoba, Tolima, Choco, Putumayo, Valle del Cauca, and Cauca, GAO have occupied places of worship in order to store weapons, drugs and/or protect themselves from the authorities. This has led to the cessation of religious services, attacks on religious leaders who oppose this, and intimidation of worshippers.
56. Roman Catholic church buildings have been attacked by extremists, in particular in 2021 on International Women's Day and again in September.<sup>27</sup>
57. In one example, on 20 March 2022 a group of masked individuals violently entered the Primate Cathedral while a religious celebration was taking place and proceeded to scream obscenities, criticizing the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup> The building was vandalised for the first time in April 2019, after a series of clashes between masked individuals and anti-riot police when several vandals attacked the facade of the Primate Cathedral with stones. The level of violence was such that the police officers were forced to take refuge in front of the gate of the compound.
58. On 29 September 2021 in Medellín, the Church of San Ignacio, which was built more than two hundred years ago, was attacked by a group of young protesters.<sup>29</sup> They ripped off and destroyed a door, bars, graffitied the exterior walls and threatened to set fire to the church at the end of a Eucharist Mass.
59. On 29 March 2021, a group of about 10 people dressed

in the uniform of the National Police entered the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Colombia (CEC) headquarters in Bogotá.<sup>30</sup> After gagging the church officials who were still in the buildings, the robbers forced entry into some of the offices, causing great damage, and stole money with which the CEC carries out pastoral actions and provides humanitarian aid. The intruders also stole digital information and were supported by two policeman and a staff member in the technical and judicial investigation group of the Public Prosecutor's office.<sup>31</sup>

## Attacks against Indigenous & FoRB

60. According to a 2018 census carried out by the National Administration Department of Statistics (DANE) 115 indigenous people groups make up a total of 4.4% of the Colombian population.<sup>32</sup> However, sources such as the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) recognise 102 indigenous people groups and 65 languages.<sup>33</sup> Indigenous reserves collectively make up one third of the country's territory. While not all indigenous people live on the reserves, the majority do.
61. During the third UPR cycle, Colombia accepted 21 recommendations pertaining to the rights of indigenous peoples, including a recommendation to 'redouble efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against minorities and indigenous peoples' and to 'ensure that indigenous and rural communities can express their free and informed consent prior to any measure that may affect their lives and their ancestral land'.<sup>34</sup> However, during the reporting period, violations continued.
62. CSW's 2022 report titled 'Belief and belonging: Indigenous identity and freedom of religion or belief'<sup>35</sup> extensively

21 El Heraldo, 'en video roban en Iglesia de malambo y se llevan hasta el dinero de las ofrendas', 8 November 2019, <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/en-video-roban-en-iglesia-de-malambo-y-se-llevaron-hasta-el-dinero-de-las-ofrendas-678958>

22 W Radio, 'Roban 12 millones de pesos en Iglesia de sector exclusiva del Bucaramanga', 5 September 2022, <https://www.wradio.com.co/2022/09/05/roban-12-millones-de-pesos-en-iglesia-de-sector-exclusivo-del-area-de-bucaramanga/>

23 Noticias Caracol 'Dios todo lo ve hombre cometio sacrilegio en parroquia donde no gente pero si una camara', 31 January 2020, <https://noticias.caracoltv.com/valle/dios-todo-lo-ve-hombre-cometio-sacrilegio-en-parroquia-donde-no-habia-gente-pero-si-una-camara>

24 R Noticias TV, 'Insolito ladrones se llevaron hasta la limosna de una Iglesia en facatativa', 22 September 2021, <https://www.rodrigoavilav.com/categorias/10-facatativa/7080-insolito-ladrones-se-llevaron-hasta-la-limosna-de-una-iglesia-en-facatativa>

25 EL Nuevo Día, 'Indignante robo en Iglesia del Tolima: ladrones entraron 'la casa de Dios' y la destruyeron', 6 August 2021, <https://www.elnuevodia.com.co/nuevodia/actualidad/judicial/471933-indignante-robo-en-iglesia-del-tolima-ladrones-entraron-la-casa-de-dios>

26 Noticias Caracol, 'A plena luz del día delincuentes entraron a la casa cural de Pradera y se llevaron la caja fuerte', 2 April 2018, <https://noticias.caracoltv.com/valle/a-plena-luz-del-dia-delincuentes-entraron-a-la-casa-curial-de-pradera-y-se-llevaron-la-caja-fuerte>

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28 El Tiempo, 'Otras ocasiones en que Catedral Primada ha sido atacada en hechos de vandalismo', 29 September 2022 <https://www.eltiempo.com/bogota/catedral-primada-recuento-de-ataques-vandalicos-en-medio-de-protestas-706108>

29 Proclamada del Cauca 'Colombia en la lista mundial de la persecución contra cristianos', 9 February 2022, <https://www.proclamadelcauca.com/colombia-en-la-lista-mundial-de-la-persecucion-contra-cristianos/>

30 Religion Digital, 'EL CELAM muestra solidaridad ante el grave ataque a la sede de la Conferencia Episcopal Colombia', 31 March 2021, [https://www.religiondigital.org/luis\\_miguel\\_modino-misionero-en-brasil/CELAM-solidaridad-Conferencia-Episcopal-Colombia\\_7\\_2327837200.html](https://www.religiondigital.org/luis_miguel_modino-misionero-en-brasil/CELAM-solidaridad-Conferencia-Episcopal-Colombia_7_2327837200.html)

31 El Tiempo, 'Capturan a dos policías y agente del CTI por robo en Conferencia Episcopal', 20 July 2021, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/delitos/robo-conferencia-episcopal-capturan-a-dos-policias-y-agente-de-cti-606786#:~:text=Mariana%20Guerrero%20Alvarez,-29%20de%20julio%202021%2C%2008%3A30%20A,M.&text=A%20finales%20de%20marzo%20de,personal%20que%20se%20encontraba%20all%C3%AD>

32 DANE, Report: 'Población indígena de Colombia', 16 September 2019, [www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf](http://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf)

33 Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia, 'Pueblos indígenas' (Spanish), 29 November, [www.onic.org.co/noticias/2-sin-categoria/1038-pueblos-indigenas](http://www.onic.org.co/noticias/2-sin-categoria/1038-pueblos-indigenas)

34 United Nations, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Colombia, 9 July 2018, [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/39/6](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/39/6)

35 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Report: 'Belief and belonging: Indigenous identity and freedom of religion or belief', October 2022, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2022/12/07/report/5882/article.htm>

documents the unique violations experienced by indigenous religious minorities, including in Colombia. Violations in Colombia are in large part carried out by community leaders and local authorities, with the backing of the courts that have ruled that the strong protections for FoRB in the Colombian constitution do not extend to those living on indigenous lands, where collective cultural rights take precedence instead.

63. In some autonomous zones, indigenous groups govern themselves in keeping with their culture and traditions, but in a discriminatory manner against members who choose a different belief system or none.
64. Some traditional punishments including flogging with a whip, the use of stocks, and forced exile also violate human rights law, including those addressing torture or cruel treatment, in incidents where children in indigenous communities have been harassed because of their parents' faith, in violation of Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Article 18 of the ICCPR.
65. The justice system operating on indigenous reserves<sup>36</sup> continues to function without a delimitation in the typology of crimes, penalties, punishments, etc. leaving a gap in the practice of self-governance that is subjectively administered by the local indigenous authorities. This creates an environment where the violations of fundamental rights including FoRB can take place with impunity.
66. CSW's 2022 report describes a wide range of types of discrimination experienced by members of religious minorities in indigenous groups, ranging from rejection by their families, to the denial of certain rights, including the right to work and the right to an education, and exclusion from leadership positions. Achagua interviewees reported that they are excluded from 'indigenous movement' meetings and whenever traditional religious leaders are present in a meeting. An Emberá-Wounaan interviewee from San Juan del Litoral Municipality stated that the type of discrimination that has most affected him is being denied opportunities to work because of his religious beliefs.
67. A 17-year-old Wiwa boy shared that the traditional authorities in his community are forcing young people to 'submit to ancestral practice' or be denied access to opportunities for higher education, under the justification that traditions and order must be maintained in order to guarantee autonomy.
68. A number of the interviewees had experienced forced displacement, including one of the Emberá-Wounaan interviewees. An Arhuaco interviewee said that while he did not consider himself to be forcibly displaced, he had left his community because he was experiencing threats, harassment, torture and bullying. Another interviewee, an Achagua, said that in his community, Protestant Christians have been subjected to threats, forced displacement, harassment, denial of communal property, arbitrary detention, kidnapping, torture and forced recruitment by illegal armed groups because of their religious beliefs.
69. Manuel Masore, an Embera Katio Indian, was expelled in June 2018 from his community in Cordoba department, because of his help in translating the New Testament into the indigenous language. He was displaced with his wife and nine children and now lives in San José de Ure. One month later, in the same region, the indigenous authorities expelled the Christian pastor who lived there because they did not want him to continue sharing his faith.
70. On 15 July 2019, the indigenous councils on the Talaga Nasa Reserve in Huila displaced an entire community from their territory because they refused to renounce their faith; 45 Nasa families, were forcibly displaced by the indigenous leaders in collaboration with GAOs operating in the area.
71. On 31 December 2022, the Betania indigenous church in Calderas, Cauca was semi-destroyed after two men set fire to objects used during worship. A neighbour witnessed the incident. The attackers performed a religious ritual first, traces of which were left after the church burned down. The church is in an area inhabited by indigenous people, but is not in an indigenous reserve, but rather privately owned land, thus the Law of Autonomy should not apply. Nonetheless, there were no consequences for the action and fear caused around half of the regular church attendees to cease their involvement.
72. In March 2023, 10 Arhuaca families in the Seynurwa area in Magdalena, reported that they are constantly threatened and receive discriminatory treatment in health and education services due to their Christian faith. Members self-censor in order to be free to leave their territory and visit their church leaders.
73. In another area of Magdalena, also among the Arhuacos, more than 10 cases of arbitrary detention, extending from two to five months, were reported for reasons included refusing to renounce their faith, being found praying in a Christian manner, and attempting to travel abroad to study Biblical theology. Those targeted were tortured and mistreated while detained.
74. Forced marriages were also reported. In most cases, the objective was to force mostly men to remain on the reserve and to continue practicing traditional forms of religion.
75. In the Sibundoy Valley, Putumayo, members of religious minorities in the Ingas and Camsa people groups live under continuous self-censorship, due to pressure from the majority on minority religious groups including

36 USAID Colombia, Report: 'Jurisdicción especial indígena, Bastón Jurídico' <https://www.minjusticia.gov.co/programas-co/fortalecimiento-etnico/Documents/Documentos/JEI%20-%20BASTON%20JURIDICO%20Definitivo.pdf?csf=1&e=i4IGCj>

Protestant Christians.

### **Recommendations to the government of Colombia:**

- 76. Prioritise the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of conscience, calling for an end to all restrictions and violations in dialogues with all actors in the armed conflict.**
- 77. Investigate and hold accountable those responsible for attacks on places of worship.**
- 78. Strengthen protection mechanisms of the communities in territories with the presence of illegal armed groups and organized crime structures in order to guarantee fundamental human rights in accordance with the law.**
- 79. Investigate and address the issue of GAOs 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.**
- 80. Call for an end to the forced recruitment of minors by armed groups as part of the dialogue for the Total Peace.**
- 81. Translate Colombian laws into indigenous languages; and provide training to indigenous representatives, including traditional and religious leaders and members of their communities, on human rights, including FoRB, the Colombian constitution and indigenous jurisprudence.**
- 82. Ensure the protection of indigenous territories, including by complying with the Peace Agreement of 2 October 2016.**
- 83. Encourage and facilitate dialogue led by indigenous traditional and religious leaders and representatives of non-traditional religious groups, to explore and identify common ground and possibilities for peaceful co-existence and mutual respect.**
- 84. Facilitate dialogues including between the national government, religious affairs offices and local and territorial governments to discuss policies of religious diversity in Colombian indigenous contexts.**
- 85. Prioritise interreligious initiatives that promote the protection and development of children and adolescents, and indigenous.**
- 86. Ensure comprehensive reporting on the right to freedom of religion or belief is included in all reports on human rights that are generated by the State.**
- 87. Create a Freedom of Religion or Belief Observatory to document FoRB violations and to establish a**

*permanent conversation with Cooperation Agencies, NGOs, Associations working on the right to FoRB.*

**CSW everyone  
free to believe**

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