



To: Members of the International Community
Re: Human Rights Violations and Humanitarian Situation in Colombia

May 20, 2021

Dear Colleague,

We write to you with grave concern about the ongoing violence and the militarized response to the weeks-long National Civic Strike in Colombia. As has been widely reported, security forces have met demonstrators with egregious violence, including sexual violence, throughout Colombia, and particularly in the city of Santiago de Cali. Cali has a substantial Afro-descendant population and a history of receiving those fleeing conflict in the Pacific, who are often forcibly displaced from their territories and made to live in relative precarity in the city.¹ Evidence points to disproportionate impact of state violence on Afro-descendant protesters in Cali.²

Across Colombia, from April 28-May 17, advocates reported 2,387 cases of police violence against demonstrators, including 43 killings, 18 cases of sexual violence, and at least 379 disappeared.³ One victim, a minor, committed suicide after being subject to sexual violence by police in Popayán.⁴ As of early May in Cali, 32 demonstrators were killed.⁵ Particularly disturbing is possible evidence of people dressed as civilians shooting at demonstrators and instances where police stood by as civilians shot at Indigenous and other protesters.⁶ Also troubling is that Colombia's president, who deployed the military and heavy machinery to confront protests, has indicated a willingness to apply emergency rule, which would restrict civil rights and allow for preventive arrests without due process.⁷

In the midst of the demonstrations, ongoing armed actor violence has worsened Colombia's humanitarian crisis, leading, for example, to the recent displacement of over 1,000 in the Telembi

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/internally-displaced-outside-of-camps-and-the-role-of-local-authorities-in-colombia-a-comparative-study-of-bogot-dc-and-cali/>

² <https://towardfreedom.org/colombia/racism-exclusion-and-state-violence-the-brutal-repression-of-peaceful-protest-in-colombia/>

³ <https://twitter.com/TembloresOng/status/1394709887377096706>; <https://www.nodal.am/2021/05/colombia-organizaciones-denuncian-379-desaparecidos-en-protestas-y-se-abre-una-puerta-al-dialogo-entre-duque-y-los-dirigentes-del-paro/>

⁴ <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Colombia-Womens-Rights-Activists-Reject-Police-Sexual-Abuse-20210514-0001.html>

⁵ <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/cali-epicentro-violentas-protestas-colombia-n4222312>

⁶ <https://colombiapeace.org/?fbclid=IwAR3DwGJxCnO5IkWMhvDP8vR2hxggdKcMwm9jSd0kJ5tzTnkQx7VgzboIkyC>; <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/paro-nacional-en-cali-policia-confirma-que-del-camion-si-se-bajaron-agentes-vestidos-de-civiles-article/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PROq9J62dk>

⁷ <https://lasillavacia.com/uribe-le-pide-duque-recurrir-unas-fuerzas-militares-cada-vez-mas-ideologizadas-81515>; <https://www.elespectador.com/politica/estado-de-conmocion-interior-que-es-y-como-entenderlo-article/>

region of Nariño, the second mass displacement in the region in under a month.⁸ A failure to fully implement the aspects of the Peace Accord between the Government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) that were meant to address longstanding racial, gender, and economic inequality is a significant driver of the ongoing violence.

To prevent further escalation, the Colombian government should take proactive measures to diffuse violence and address humanitarian needs. Recently started discussions between the Government and the Civic Strike Committee represent an important step towards peace, and what is called for now is a **national, inclusive, participative and diverse dialogue that ensures respect for people's rights**. We respectfully ask you to consider calling on the Government of Colombia to:

1. **Refrain from instituting emergency rule, demilitarize the state protest response, and refrain from prosecuting demonstrators who blocked roads to call for change.** Emergency rule (*estado de conmoción interior*) would place more power in the hands of militarized state forces, members of which have been filmed killing unarmed civilians. Ending military and anti-riot police deployment to protests would help diminish the primary cause of violence at demonstrations, namely these same state forces. Prosecuting demonstrators who are responding to deepening poverty and hunger in Colombia will increase tensions and do nothing to address the inequality driving Colombia's conflict.
2. **In coordination with grassroots organizations representing impoverished communities, and with Afro-descendant and Indigenous authorities, comply with previous agreements that are meant to end poverty and inequality.** These include agreements reached previously with the Civic Strike Committee, those made in the context of Indigenous *Mingas*, and agreements with Afro-descendant and Indigenous Peoples in relation to the National Development Plan. Ending poverty also requires meaningfully implementing the 2016 Peace Accord and its gender and racial justice provisions, and consulting with communities most impacted by conflict, including poor, rural, Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, to enact immediate humanitarian relief necessary to address acute hunger and poverty.
3. **Support an independent investigation into killings, torture, sexual violence and other attacks against protesters, including against Indigenous Guard and Afro-descendant protesters, and ensure justice for victims of state violence.** Diffusing tensions requires the Government to commit to meaningfully investigate and prosecute torture, sexual violence, physical violence, and murder committed by state actors or with their acquiescence. The Government should permit monitors from regional and international human rights bodies to visit, observe, report, and provide technical assistance.

In bringing these concerns to your attention, we are lending our support to, and pledging our future assistance with, any efforts that you undertake to remedy human rights violations taking place in Colombia and welcome a response to this letter from you.

⁸ <https://www.bluradio.com/blu360/pacifico/reportan-desplazamiento-forzado-de-mas-de-1-000-personas-en-roberto-payan-narino>

Sincerely,

Proceso de Comunidades Negras
MADRE
Outright Action International
Global Network of Women Peacebuilders
Oxfam Colombia