

10 March 2021

Mr Leo Varadkar TD
Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: Your Visit to Colombia on St. Patrick's Day

Dear Tánaiste,

I am writing to you ahead of your visit to Colombia to express our serious concern over high levels of violence in the country and the impact this is having on the peace process.

Through our work with the trade union-funded organisation Justice for Colombia, Congress has campaigned extensively on issues of human rights and peace in Colombia. Congress affiliates have participated in JFC delegations to Colombia, where they have witnessed first-hand the challenges faced by trade unionists and human rights defenders. We therefore ask that you make representations to the Colombian government on the issues detailed below.

Colombia remains the world's most dangerous country for trade unionists, with the International Trade Union Confederation registering 22 killings between March 2020 and April 2021. These victims are added to the over 3,200 trade unionists murdered from 1971 to 2018, according to research compiled by Colombia's National Trade Union School. On 19 January 2022, a car bomb exploded outside regional offices of the CUT trade union confederation in Arauca, eastern Colombia, while CUT executive members have received death threats on several occasions.

Congress affiliates have met on numerous occasions with the CUT, as well as two of the unions most impacted by violence, the FECODE teachers' union and the FENSUAGRO rural workers' union, both of which continue to see their members murdered and threatened with shocking regularity. Most recently, José González Marín of FENSUAGRO, which formally partners with Congress-affiliated Unite the Union, was murdered on 31 January. Close to 40 FENSUAGRO members have been murdered since 2016.

Even as they are being killed, Colombian trade unionists face stigmatisation from politicians with large public platforms. María Fernanda Cabal and Carlos Felipe Mejía of the Democratic Centre, the party of President Iván Duque, have falsely accused FECODE of seeking to indoctrinate or harm children from low-income backgrounds. These reprehensible smears appear attempts to legitimise or, worse, encourage aggression towards trade unionists.

The wider human rights situation is extremely alarming. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) received reports of 196 murders of human rights defenders, including 28 women, in 2021 alone. National human rights organisations put the figure at more than 1,300 social activists murdered since the signing of Colombia's peace agreement in November 2016. In addition, more than 300 former combatants in the FARC-EP have been murdered since they entered the peace process. These horrifying figures lay bare the scale of the human rights crisis.

Since 2018, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia has repeatedly emphasised the urgent need for the National Commission for Security Guarantees (CNGS), created in the peace agreement, to activate its policy for dismantling paramilitary and other armed groups behind much of the violence. However, this still has not happened, with the Commission's members, who include the president, government ministers and the heads of the police and the army, having met only a handful of times since it was founded.

On 1 March, Colombia's transitional justice court, the JEP, ordered the government to activate the CNGS' policy and said "there is not clarity over how [its] decisions are taken." This followed January's Constitutional Court ruling that the government has violated the rights of former combatants by failing to ensure their security. According to the UN, full implementation of the peace agreement is the most effective means of addressing violence but the government is clearly disregarding its obligations.

The UN has also addressed the potential for increased violence ahead of Congressional elections on 13 March and the presidential election on 29 May. These elections will see the belated activation of the Special Districts for Peace, 16 Congressional seats designated for representatives of communities historically impacted by conflict and inequality. However, Colombia's National Electoral Mission recently warned that over half the municipalities covered by the Special Districts for Peace are at risk of violence. Authorities must ensure that these communities' chosen representatives can exercise their democratic mandate without fear of violence or coercion.

Unfortunately, Congress has little confidence that the current administration in its final months will seek to improve its dismal record on human rights, given its brutal response to trade union-backed protests over inequality and the human rights crisis in April and May last year. National human rights organisations say police killed 44 protesters, while leaving more than 100 with permanent eye injuries and injuring or arresting thousands more. A report published in December by the OHCHR cited "unnecessary or disproportionate use of force by police officers" and said that "armed individuals also attacked and fired on demonstrators without the security forces intervening." However, there has been very little accountability for state agents implicated in abuses.

Congress welcomes the valuable contribution made by your government to supporting peace and human rights in Colombia. Members of our Executive Council have met and had regular communication with the Irish Embassy in Bogota and with the Department of Foreign Affairs over the last two years and we very much look forward to continuing this constructive dialogue. We ask that you raise our concerns as a priority in your meetings with Colombian government officials as it is clear that concerted international pressure is needed to address violence in Colombia and to ensure the Duque government and its successor fulfil their obligations to the Colombian people. Ireland's experiences of peacebuilding and reconciliation helped Colombia reach its historic peace agreement and we believe that our country's involvement is required as much today as it was then.

We wish you a safe and successful trip and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further at a time of your convenience when you return.

Yours sincerely,



Patricia King
General Secretary

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