

briefing

Colombia

Human rights and religious freedom in Colombia

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CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

PO Box 99, New Malden,
Surrey KT3 3YF

T: 0845 456 5464

E: admin@cswworldwide.org.uk

W: www.cswworldwide.org.uk

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 281836

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I. Introduction

Colombia has been torn apart by violence for the past four decades due to the rise of different leftist guerrilla groups, and more recently the rise of right-wing paramilitary armed groups. These groups have lost most of their original ideological base and all employ similar violence and intimidation tactics as they vie for territory - both in terms of land and the narcotics trade. Some, such as the leftist FARC^[1] and the ELN^[2] have forged "partnerships" as they continue to battle the government. Others, like the rightwing AUC, have splintered into factions as some accept a ceasefire and others do not and now often fight amongst themselves, as well as against the guerrillas. The Colombian military has itself often taken an ambiguous position in regard to violence between the different groups, and unfortunately, has at times been implicated in either passively siding with or actively fighting alongside rightwing paramilitary groups.

The current government, under the leadership of Alvaro Uribe, has pushed a hardline agenda aimed at wiping out terrorist organizations. International observers, however, including NGO's and governmental organizations (including UN agencies, the US government and the EU government) have expressed serious concern at the methods employed in this endeavour.

In late 2003 Uribe attempted to push through legislation that would have severely curtailed civil rights. This, however, went to a national referendum and was soundly defeated. Nevertheless he has, in the meantime, attempted to pass some of the points on the referendum through the Colombian legislature. In December 2003 the Colombian Congress passed legislation granting judicial powers to the military which have may have a dangerously negative impact on respect for basic human rights. They will now, for example, no longer have to obtain a warrant before detaining individuals or in order to intercept and monitor communications.

In addition, Uribe has sought an increasingly close relationship with the Colombian military, which, as stated above, has a highly dubious record on human rights and respect for civilians. Unfortunately, like some members of the military, Uribe has very little tolerance for any form of criticism directed at his policies and has also caused great concern in the human rights community, both domestic and international, by publicly referring to human rights organisations (without specifying which ones) as supporters of terrorist or guerrilla organisations.^[3]

Most worryingly, following a historical precedent set in other Latin American countries to eliminate not only violent groups but also any peaceful voices of opposition, it appears that the Uribe administration, along with elements in the Colombia military, has begun to target social activists, including union leaders, peace activists, human rights workers, and even members of the clergy. It is important to emphasise that many of these individuals have no connections with any armed group, but rather eschew violence. They have, however, been detained and apparently framed by authority figures - who accuse them of supporting terrorism. Worryingly, this looks more and more like a campaign to consolidate Uribe's base of power and to purge all voices of opposition and criticism. Considering that many of these individuals have been utterly committed to peace initiatives, this does call into question what exactly Uribe means by his avowed commitment to peace in Colombia.

^[1] The largest left-wing guerrilla group - FARC stands for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*)

^[2] The second largest leftwing guerrilla group - ELN are the initials of the National Liberation Army (*Ejercito del Liberación Nacional*)

^[3] This type of public declaration, in Colombia, is widely understood to give a green light to paramilitary organizations to carry out targeted assassinations of human rights workers.

CSW is particularly concerned by this trend because of the role that significant sectors of the Church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have taken up at the forefront of peace and human rights movement.

2. Religious Freedom in Colombia

2.1.1. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Related Issues

International observers and human rights groups have repeatedly drawn attention to the particular plight of indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups within the conflict. These groups have historically been neglected by Colombian society and particularly by the government authorities. The Colombian constitution allows for the autonomy of these groups but this freedom from government control has also resulted in the severe marginalization of the groups. This in turn means little or no protection from groups or individuals, who in a bid to control territory, often display a total lack of regard for the human rights of these groups.

Many of these groups have asked to be left alone by the armed groups and want no part of the violence. Unfortunately, all of the armed groups, including the Colombia military, have not only disregarded these pleas but have even set up camp on the peripheries of their villages, a move which often puts the inhabitants at the epicentre of any local conflict.

With reference to religious persecution CSW was told that armed groups regularly singled out Christians in these groups for harassment. In some cases, already impoverished communities of indigenous or Afro-Colombian Christians were evicted from their land solely because of their profession of faith. In one example, when FARC guerrillas took control of land where one particular indigenous group was based, they rounded up the entire village into the middle of the settlement and then asked all of the Christians to step forward, first the children, then the women, and finally the men. They were told to leave the settlement at once and found themselves landless and completely destitute, their community broken. According to Church leaders who work with these groups, such cases are not uncommon.

2.1.2. Conflict Related Religious Persecution

CSW conducted its first fact-finding visit to Colombia in September 2003 after receiving a number of reports that the Church in Colombia has been suffering persecution within the context of the greater conflict in that country and that they are in desperate need of solidarity and advocacy. What the delegation found in Colombia was far more serious and disturbing than expected.

Much of the violence takes place in and around civilian communities - both urban and rural. None of the groups appears to have any hesitation in taking civilian lives and actively seek out non-combatants for threats and acts of aggression if those persons are perceived to be unsupportive of the group in question. The implications of this policy on the Church and especially on church leaders in zones of conflict are extremely serious.

Church leaders who speak out publicly against the violence, injustice, corruption, and the narcotics trade often become instant targets. The assassination of men and women who are successful in persuading other people not to take part in the violence, whether those people are only potential recruits or actually former members of the armed groups who made the decision to defect, has been designated a valid military objective by high-level commanders in each of the armed groups. In addition, Christians who refuse to cooperate^[4] with the armed groups that control the areas in which they live have often been forced to leave their homes and now make up a sizeable portion of Colombia's internally displaced population, which numbers anywhere from 1 to 4 million people.

^[4] Cooperation can mean not only participating in acts of violence, but also working in the coca fields, other types of forced labour including building of infrastructure, attending indoctrination meetings, and sexual slavery.

Illustrating a clear case of targeted persecution of Christians, CSW was told that in 2000 a high-level member of FARC defected from the armed group. This individual confirmed that an order had been issued from the highest levels of the guerrilla group that from that point on the assassination of Protestant pastors was to be considered a legitimate military objective. Since then over one hundred pastors have been assassinated.^[5]

CSW also learnt that in many areas controlled by the armed groups, particularly those areas under FARC control, more than 400 Protestant churches have been forced to close, the pastors commanded to stop preaching or even forced to leave, and local Christians prohibited from praying, singing or meeting in groups of more than two families. As rationale FARC has accused Protestant pastors of being agents of capitalist imperialism and/or working for the CIA. It would appear, however, that they are more worried about containing church growth as the vast majority of Christians refuse to cooperate or take part in violence and pastors often instigate, encourage and support this stance.

All of the armed groups regularly send members of their groups to attend church services to observe and report on the activities of the church and its members. As a result, pastors and other church leaders must exercise extreme caution in their choice of words and methods of outreach.

It is important to recognise, however, that while FARC has been the armed group most vocally targeting Christians, all armed groups are conducting strategic assassinations of church leaders (both Roman Catholic and Protestant). Christians who are involved in human rights work or peace initiatives are particular targets.

2.1.3. Government Discrimination

As in much of Latin America the Roman Catholic Church maintains a special relationship with the government and as such wields considerable influence. While a constitutional amendment in 1991 allows for "religious equality with liberty" there are still numerous discrepancies in state treatment of non-Roman Catholic religious communities. While the Roman Catholic Church is tax exempt, Protestant churches are often considered commercial enterprises and unless they receive a special exemption from their local government (which they often do not) they are taxed accordingly. Protestant pastors report that their churches have even, on multiple occasions, been accused by both local and high ranking government officials of being fronts for money-laundering operations of the various armed groups in an effort to shut them down or extort money from the individual churches.

Discrepancies also spill over into state institutions like the military and prison system. While the Roman Catholic Church is given a chapel in every prison and responsibility for providing spiritual guidance to military units, Protestants and other faiths are not accorded the same right. Pastors reported that many Protestant youth who had been forcibly conscripted into the Colombian military have been forced to attend Roman Catholic masses against their will under threat of disciplinary punishment.

Lastly, Protestant leaders protested that while the Roman Catholic Church runs a number of highly regarded universities (as well as primary and secondary schools), universities and seminaries run by Protestant denominations have run into huge obstacles when applying for accreditation. While a few have now received government recognition this remains an ongoing problem.

^[5] In one example, while CSW was in Colombia, a report was received that the pastor of a Foursquare Church in Arauca was assassinated by FARC. He was 36 years old, married, and had two small sons. The guerrillas had not permitted the removal of the body or any church leaders to enter the area.

3. Recommendations

3.1.1. To the Colombian government and all armed groups in Colombia:

- While the conflict in Colombia makes the promotion of human rights across the board extremely difficult, CSW believes that it is the responsibility of the Colombian government to act as a model for its citizens by respecting and promoting human rights and dignity for all of its population.
- CSW also calls upon the Colombian government, and in particular the administration of Alvaro Uribe, to back up its avowed commitment to peace by supporting grassroots and civil society initiatives aimed at achieving peaceful and lasting resolution of conflict. The government should also publicly recognise and support the valuable contribution that human rights defenders offer the country through their work.
- As the Colombian government continues to pursue a dialogue with paramilitary groups, CSW urges the Colombian government to continue to apply pressure on the members of these groups to respect human rights, particularly those of civilians non-combatants, in the areas under their control as well as conflict zones.
- At the same time, CSW also calls upon all of the armed groups, most of which covet international political recognition, to abide by international standards of human rights and to work actively towards peace.

3.1.2. To the United Kingdom:

- CSW calls on the UK to encourage President Uribe to ensure that human rights are respected by government forces and agents and that religious freedom and equality is guaranteed to all faiths.
 - CSW also calls upon the UK government to continue to promote the safety of human rights defenders around the world, and particularly, at this time in Colombia. CSW asks the UK government to consistently and clearly communicate this concern to the Colombian government.
 - Furthermore, CSW calls on the UK government, should an opportunity for an active dialogue with the different armed groups arise, to use its influence to encourage those groups to respect freedom of conscience and faith in the areas under their control.
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