

briefing

Colombia

Religious liberty and freedom of conscience

FOR PUBLIC USE

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1. Thanks

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) wishes to thank our partners at the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace (CRVP) of the Colombian Council of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL) and at Justapaz for their ongoing work to document human rights violations across the country. Most importantly we wish to recognise the work of the men and women across the country who, despite the risks, continue to document the human rights violations taking place in their communities. CSW also expresses our deep gratitude to the victims and survivors for their courage in speaking out. This report could never have been written were it not for them.

2. Recommendations

2.1. To the Colombian Government

- The Colombian Government must take the lead in guaranteeing respect for the rights associated with freedom of worship and belief. This includes ensuring that these rights, as set out in Colombia's Constitution as well as in the American Convention on Human Rights (San Jose Pact), the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), are upheld for all inhabitants and citizens of Colombia.
- The Colombian Government must set an example in respecting the rule of law and should ensure that men and women working on behalf of the Colombian Government, including government leaders, members of the intelligence services and members of the police and military, strictly follow international humanitarian law and meet international human rights standards, including those relating to freedom of religion and conscience.
- The Colombian Government, through the offices of the Attorney General, must initiate and carry out investigations into assassinations, attacks and threats made against church leaders, including cases of forced disappearance, and offer adequate protection and security for witnesses and others who denounce human rights violations.
- The Colombian Government must take strong measures to ensure that its security forces do not forcibly induct minors into the military or use children as operatives including as message runners and informants.
- The Colombian Government should reach out to representatives of different faith groups in Colombia and ensure their representation in demobilisation and peace talks. As part of this, the Colombian Government should convene the National Council for Peace, as required by Colombian law, in order to ensure that all actors in Colombian society, particularly those from civil society, are given a voice in the search for peace with justice.
- The Colombian Government must increase its aid and support to internally displaced communities and, most importantly, ensure that local and regional governments are held accountable for funds and other forms of aid to IDPs

channelled through their offices and agencies. In order to better support IDP communities, CSW strongly encourages the Colombian Government to:

- Ensure that IDPs receive aid and support not only in sufficient amounts but also for longer periods of time, recognising that most of the internally displaced in Colombia require aid for longer than the current limit of six months;
 - Make certain that concerted efforts are made to help IDP adults to find viable forms of employment and IDP children to continue their studies;
 - Guarantee that IDP communities wishing to return to their places of origin are allowed to do so under conditions of adequate security and guarantee them the legal rights to the lands that they fled;
 - Reform voter re-registration processes in order to ensure that IDP populations are enfranchised and can exercise their right to vote in local, regional and national elections and referendums.
- The Colombian Government must carry out due diligence in monitoring paramilitary organisations and members of paramilitary organisations which have participated in demobilisation programmes in order to ensure that they have fully demobilised and have not resumed their activities.
 - The Colombian Government must allocate sufficient resources for effective follow-up support and protection for those members of the armed groups who agree to demobilise as part of the peace processes and to engage with civil society groups to create comprehensive programmes to assist the demobilised in the reintegration process.
 - The Colombian Government must recognise the existence of “re-emergent” paramilitary groups across the country and take strong measures to reverse this trend. Investigations into reports of collusion between illegal armed groups and government officials must be carried out. Effective legal mechanisms for the protection of children who are under threat of forcible recruitment or who have already been forcibly recruited by these groups must be implemented immediately.

2.2. To the armed actors

- The armed actors must lay down their weapons, cease all illegal activities and pursue a negotiated solution to the conflict. As long as hostilities continue, however, CSW calls on all of the armed actors to respect and follow international humanitarian law and meet international human rights standards.
- All parties in the conflict should take immediate measures to ensure that freedom of worship and belief and respect for places of worship are upheld in all parts of the country. This includes allowing churches which have been forcibly shut down to

reopen and guaranteeing the rights of individual Christians and Christian communities to meet together for religious purposes in all parts of the country.

- The different armed groups must stop targeting church leaders and allow them to carry out their work without hindrance. CSW particularly calls on the FARC-EP to rescind its directive designating protestant pastors as legitimate military targets.
- All parties in the conflict should immediately cease the practice of forcible recruitment of minors and of adults.
- The armed groups should uphold the right to freedom of conscience and cease singling out for punishment individual men, women and communities who refuse to take part in illegal activities or activities which go against their values and beliefs.

2.3. To the European Union (EU) and EU Member States

- The EU as a backer of the demobilisation and peace processes should continue to press the Colombian Government to ensure that all paramilitary groups participating in the process are fully demobilised. Effective and well-monitored programs for training and reintegration into society should be encouraged and supported as much as possible.
- If and as the Colombian Government and any of the armed groups explore a possible peace process, the EU should seek ways to support this process and to push the parties to incorporate into any peace agreement the concerns and rights of the victims of human rights atrocities committed by both sides.
- The EU gives a substantial amount of humanitarian and development aid to Colombia each year. Much of this is aimed at support for the displaced and “peace laboratories.” The EU should maintain these programmes and also do its utmost to ensure that the aid reaches the target populations, in its entirety.
- In addition, the EU should encourage the Colombian Government to seek more effective ways to support its displaced population, for example by extending the period for which they are eligible to receive aid to longer than six months and ensuring that the displaced populations are enfranchised and guaranteed the right to exercise their right to democratic representation at the local, regional, and national levels.
- While acknowledging the efforts that the EU makes to engage with representatives of civil society in Colombia, and in particular its commitment to support human rights defenders under the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, the EU should ensure that it incorporates into its dialogues the representatives of different faith organisations, including the Protestant and Catholic churches,.
- With regard to the Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflict, the EU should also seek ways to improve support for the rehabilitation of child soldiers and increase assistance to agencies and organisations that aid children fleeing forced recruitment

by the armed groups. The EU should put pressure on the Colombian Government to ensure that Colombian security forces cease recruitment of juveniles as runners and informants.

- With regard to the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, the EU representations in Colombia (including both the Commission Delegation and Presidency representations) should continue to reach out to civil society groups to ensure that they are aware of these guidelines and their implementation. The EU should take into account the fact that human rights defenders carrying out grassroots documentation of human rights violations in volatile regions are particularly vulnerable but also the least likely to be aware of these policies and to seek ways to address this problem.

3. Executive summary

Religious persecution is not a phrase that is commonly associated with Colombia. The high profile of the Roman Catholic Church and internationally known mega-churches in the largest cities, alongside rapid church growth over the past decades, have contributed to a widespread perception, held both within and outside of the country that, although some Christians may be caught in the crossfire of the decades-long conflict, they are not singled out and persecuted because of their religious beliefs and practices. Unfortunately this perception is wrong. While the country is predominantly Christian, and many participate in religious activities on a regular basis without any hindrance, a significant percentage of the population is subjected to consistent and serious violations of their religious freedom.

The complexity of the internal conflict coupled with an overwhelmingly disastrous human rights situation have contributed to a lack of awareness regarding the precise impact of the conflict on communities of faith. The situation has been compounded by a reluctance among affected communities to speak out about the abuses they suffer because of their fear of retaliation by the armed groups. The truth is that many Christians in Colombia, particularly those living in conflict zones or areas controlled by illegal armed groups, suffer direct persecution on a daily basis because of their faith. Across the country, churches have been closed and religious activity forbidden by order of the armed groups. Entire Christian communities have been displaced. Pastors and church leaders have been marked for assassination. In many cases these threats have been carried out.

Over the past year, CSW saw few improvements in the religious liberty situation. Approximately 200 churches are believed to be forcibly closed and around 20 to 30 church leaders assassinated every year. There were regular reports of threats against, and forcible displacement and assassinations of church leaders. Christian youth continue to be forced into illegal armed groups while Christian converts attempting to leave the armed groups have been killed or forced into hiding. The armed groups continued to impose severe restrictions on religious activity in many parts of the country, in some cases, prohibiting it altogether. Churches were also frequent targets for extortion by the armed groups

4. Church closures and prohibition of worship

CSW continues to receive consistent reports of churches that have been forcibly closed and where religious activity has been prohibited. There are an estimated 200 churches currently forcibly closed and the vast majority of these are in areas under the control of the FARC or the ELN. However, church leaders told CSW that over the past year paramilitary groups have increasingly been responsible for forcibly shutting down churches in some parts of the country. CSW has received reports of churches closed and religious activity prohibited by

order of the guerrillas and paramilitaries in Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta, Cauca, Putumayo, Chocó, Huila, Nariño, Arauca, Santander, Norte de Santander and Tolima departments.

The prohibition on religious activity by the two guerrilla groups appears to be primarily ideological in nature. Leaders of both the FARC and the ELN have said that the prohibition of religious activity is because Christianity is incompatible with Communist ideals. In some cases, Protestant Christians are accused of being a fifth column of the United States and promoting the imperialist agenda. High profile guerrilla leaders, including the late Mono Jojoy of the FARC, have been widely reported as labelling all Protestant pastors to be supporters of former President Uribe and declaring them military targets.

A 2007 FARC edict ordering that all churches be closed and prohibiting any meetings for religious purposes across large swaths of Caquetá and Putumayo Departments is apparently still in effect. Those who disobey are threatened with death or displacement. The 2007 order was apparently put into full force in April 2008, and pastors have been forced to suspend worship and meetings in private homes. In some regions, the guerrillas have tolerated some religious activity but have banned the construction of any new places of worship. According to church leaders, in 2009 a pastor in Caquetá was threatened with death and forced to flee after ignoring such an order and continuing to build a modest church building.

Christians who resist the orders to cease all religious activity tell of secret meetings of two or three people for prayer and Bible study. A pastor working in an area under the control of the FARC recounted to CSW how she would hold clandestine services in different locations in the jungle until the guerrillas found out and she was forced to flee and go into hiding in a different part of the country. According to an internally displaced person (IDP) who had left his village, which is now under FARC control in Caquetá, local Christians dealt with the forced closure of the church in their village by joining churches in the surrounding hamlets. When the FARC realised this they issued an order that all religious activity was forbidden.

Consequences for defying these orders are severe. Last year explosive devices were placed outside a church in a small hamlet in Tolima, with the apparent aim of killing or injuring the pastors. While the pastors were not present at the time and escaped unscathed, innocent passers-by were gravely injured in the attack. In another case last year, all of the pastors in two towns in Southern Colombia were given 72 hours to leave the region after resisting an order to close their churches. Finally, in February 2009 the ELN threw out two church leaders in the department of Cauca and forbade them from carrying out any kind of religious activity.

In one of the most tragic examples, in September 2009, Pastor Manuel Camacho was gunned down by two FARC guerrillas in Guaviare in front of his wife and young children. He had resisted a number of orders to stop preaching in the area. A few weeks before his assassination, he had been approached by the local FARC commander who said, "I have heard about you, and I've heard too much. I know that you have disobeyed the order to stop preaching and for this reason you and your church are going to have to pay us 2million pesos [approximately £650] within a week."

The church was unable to pay the full amount. Church leaders explained this to the men sent to collect the fine and the guerrillas agreed to accept the amount of money that the church had managed to raise. Pastor Camacho then asked permission to preach in some of the nearby hamlets – the guerrillas said they did not have the authority to authorise these activities and would have to consult with their superiors. One of the guerrillas was overheard saying, "These evangelicals have become a plague, we told them to keep quiet and now they are spreading out all over talking and preaching their stupidity."

A few days later, two guerrillas came to the family's house and shot 33-year-old Pastor Camacho to death. His wife and children were forced to flee the region and go into hiding after coming under threat.

5. Controls on religious activity

In some parts of the country, churches have not been shut down by the armed groups but religious activity is severely restricted. This includes strict limits on the movements and work of pastors, as well as severe restrictions on time and place of worship. In many cases, religious activities are openly monitored by members of the armed groups. All armed groups, both left-wing guerrillas and re-emergent paramilitary groups are responsible for this type of violation of religious liberty. In some of the areas under the control of the FARC-EP or the ELN, church leaders also report that the import and possession of religious materials is prohibited.

The reasons behind these restrictions seem to vary somewhat depending on which group is involved; however a desire for close control over the local population and fear of the influence of church leaders is key. These groups believe that by shutting down churches or restricting expressions of worship, they can minimise the influence and growth of the churches and better exercise their own authority in areas they seek to control.¹ In many cases, pastors and church members wish to remain and be considered neutral by the armed groups because of their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the armed groups, neutrality is tantamount to open rebellion against their authority.

In parts of the country where more than one group is present, church leaders are often subjected to restrictions imposed by all groups. One pastor who oversees two churches in a very rural part of the country told CSW of preaching at the first church on Sunday mornings, with members of the Águilas Negras paramilitary group stationed in the doorways and windows monitoring his sermon and the congregation. After the service he walks two hours to the second church to speak, where he is monitored by ELN guerrillas. He is only allowed to stay there for two hours and then must return home. In addition, FARC guerrillas, who are also present have specifically prohibited members of both churches from tithing, forcing them to give in secret if they wish to support the pastor and the work and upkeep of the church. Finally, the armed groups have established a curfew from 7:00pm to 6:00am which means that the churches cannot organise any evening activities, including prayer vigils.

This pastor's situation is typical of that of many church leaders in regions where the armed groups are present. In a rural farming community in Cauca, religious activities are held in the evening because of the population's work obligations during the day. However, a daily curfew has been imposed by the FARC starting at 6:00pm. This, according to a pastor there, means that people cannot attend church services and the pastor cannot visit church members in their homes without putting their lives at risk.

A pastor living in the department of Meta told CSW representatives that although the FARC had not forbidden religious activity altogether, the group had imposed severe restrictions on the activity of the church. Religious believers have been told that they can only worship in one designated church and religious activity outside of the village is forbidden. Pastors are forbidden from bringing visiting ministers to the municipality and if they seek to travel out,

¹ A general characteristic of all of the armed groups is that, as they attempt to consolidate control over a region, they pressure the civilian populations to submit to their absolute authority. Those who resist or attempt to remain neutral are considered to be in collaboration with the enemy.

they must ask permission which is often refused. As in other cases, the guerrillas closely monitor sermons and religious activities, creating a general sense of intimidation and fear.

6. Assassinations of and attacks on pastors

Because of their influence over their congregations, pastors are often perceived by the armed groups as a serious challenge to their authority. Their position as community leaders, in addition to their work promoting morals and values that often run directly contrary to the aims of the armed groups, have made them a frequent target of the armed groups. At times, church members actively resist any involvement in activities associated with the armed groups. This includes cooperation or involvement in the cultivation or processing of illegal drugs, allowing the recruitment of their youth into the armed groups, complying with extortion demands and other types of collaboration including acting as informants. The armed groups often hold the pastors and church leaders responsible for the non-cooperation of their congregations.

Human rights organisations in Colombia estimate that 20 to 30 pastors are killed in different parts of the country per year. Sadly, CSW continued to receive consistent reports of the assassination and attempted assassinations of pastors over the past year. These murders were carried out by guerrillas and paramilitary groups and the vast majority took place in disputed regions or areas under the total control of the armed groups.

While it is not always possible to ascertain the exact reason behind a pastor's assassination, there are a number of common motives. In some cases, as can be seen from the case of Pastor Manuel Camacho, mentioned above, church leaders are targeted because of their refusal to comply with the demands of the armed groups to halt their religious work. In other cases, pastors are targeted because of the content of their work, as their message frequently conflicts with the objectives of the armed groups. Discouraging youth from joining or participating in the activities of illegal armed groups and encouraging the members of the congregations to remain neutral in the conflict are both messages that are considered extremely subversive by the armed groups. Church leaders have also been targeted for carrying out pastoral work in giving aid to those in need, for example IDPs or those who are attempting to leave the armed groups.

While the FARC and ELN continue to be responsible for the murders of pastors, over the past year there was a sharp increase in the number of pastors killed by paramilitary groups. Most of these were concentrated in the region of Southern Córdoba and the part of Northern Antioquia that borders it. A number of re-emergent paramilitary groups, most prominently the Paisas, Águilas Negras and Rastrojos, and the FARC all have a strong presence in the area and have been fighting over territory and control of the narcotics trade. Coca, the base material for cocaine, is cultivated on a large scale in this area and it is also an important corridor for moving the drugs north to be processed and exported.

A list of individuals marked for assassination, issued by one of the armed groups and circulated in one town in this area earlier this year, caused particular alarm among church leaders. Included on the list was "Pastor of the Interamericana Church". Unlike the others on the list, no specific name was included. As there had recently been a change in pastors, the wording on the list caused denominational leaders to believe that the armed group was not targeting a particular individual but rather was making it clear that they would kill any pastor sent to lead the church in that town.

A pastor from this region told CSW how he, his wife, and young son narrowly escaped an ambush by members of an unidentified armed group this summer. The three were returning on a moped from conducting pastoral work in a nearby hamlet and were intercepted by two men with machine guns who opened fire on them. While his wife and son were miraculously

unharméd, the pastor was shot through the arm. They managed to escape on the moped and sought medical treatment in a nearby city but were so fearful for their lives that they felt compelled to flee, as IDPs, to a city in another part of the country where they are now in hiding. They are unsure of the exact reason the group targeted them but believe it was because the pastor and his wife were organising religious activities in a number of hamlets in the municipality.

A number of other assassination attempts, sadly, were more successful. On 6 September 2009 Pastor Rafael Velasquez, who led the Foursquare Gospel Church in Montelíbano, Southern Córdoba, was gunned down in front of his wife and six young people from the church. Masked men broke into the couple's home, immediately following a Sunday evening service at which Pastor Velasquez had preached and shot him to death with no explanation. As the pastor had never received any threats the reasons behind his murder are unclear.

On 16 October, a few miles away, a similar scene took place. Three armed men forced their way into the home of the pastor of the Interamericana Church following an evening church service. The pastor was tied up and beaten in front of his family and then shot three times in the back. A pastor who happened to be visiting at the time was also beaten and threatened, with the armed men saying, "We know you and you know us and you had better stay quiet or leave the area." After leaving the home, the armed men went down the road and shot to death another Interamericana Church leader in front of his wife and children. The three families involved all fled the region.

Investigations carried out by CSW's partner organisation indicate that the men were likely targeted because of an event which occurred in the town a month earlier. On 15 September the Águilas Negras paramilitary group entered the town and began carrying out a massacre. Many in the population, including injured children, sought refuge in the Interamericana Church which was in the middle of a church service. The pastor and other church leader looked after the wounded. They also notified the police to come to take responsibility for the bodies of those who had been killed and to attend to those in need of medical attention. Those involved believe that this may have been the motivation behind the brutal murders.

Unfortunately, in some cases it is not only impossible to establish why a specific person was targeted but also which group was responsible. A pastor in the Pacific port city of Buenaventura, with a heavy presence of numerous illegal armed groups, reported that in January of this year he was shot at while preaching on a Sunday morning. The bullet penetrated the pulpit a few feet away from where he had been standing. While he did not know who was trying to kill him, he receives frequent anonymous threats. In 2007 a bomb exploded in front of his home at 6:00am while he was leading a prayer meeting; while no one in the house was injured, a number of passers-by were killed or maimed.

7. Forcible displacement of pastors

Pastors are also frequently forced by the armed groups to flee their homes and seek refuge in another part of the country. Far from being a random consequence of the violence, forcible displacement of church leaders is a specific strategy employed by the armed groups to remove perceived threats to their power. The motivations of the armed groups for forcibly displacing a pastor and the impact are largely the same as those connected to the assassination of a pastor. There have been consistent reports of pastors being forcibly displaced all over the country by all of the different armed groups.

Alongside the spike in assassinations discussed above, there was also a particular concentration of reported forcible displacements of pastors and their families in the region of Southern Córdoba and Northern Antioquia in 2009 and 2010. These took place steadily

over the course of the year and according to information received from CSW's partner organisation continue at the present time. Again, both paramilitary and guerrilla groups are believed to be responsible for the spate of forcible displacement.

In many cases, armed groups knowingly made impossible demands, usually financial, with which the pastors were unable to comply. In one instance in 2009, paramilitaries demanded that a pastor pay them the equivalent of £2,000, an unheard of sum in the rural and impoverished area. When the pastor and church were unable to come up with the money the paramilitaries warned them that he and his family should leave or their lives would be at risk. The pastor believes that the attempt at extortion was just a pretext to force him to leave the area and to put an end to his ministerial work. Another group of pastors in the same area reported receiving telephone calls from the Águilas Negras demanding that they give the group the relatively astronomical equivalent of £14,000. A number of the pastors felt they had no choice but to flee the area, one fled after escaping an attempted abduction in September 2009.

In other cases, however, orders to leave were received without warning. In November 2009, Pastor Pablo Antonio Tapia and his wife Arcila Álvarez López fled their village and sought refuge in a larger city after being approached by FARC guerrillas and told explicitly to leave the area or that he would be killed. The pastor and his wife, who was five months pregnant, returned home to see strange men waiting outside their home. They hid in the forest until nightfall, then gathered their belongings and fled the region.

8. Threats against church leaders

As has been outlined above, pastors and church leaders in many parts of the country work under almost constant threat. Over the past year, threats were made against pastors who refused to cooperate with armed groups, for example by not allowing them to use church facilities for operations or not complying with extortion demands. A large number of pastors in one region reported receiving phone calls over the course of a few days in which men, who identified themselves as members of a paramilitary group, demanded that the pastors 'help' some of their men. In this case, the pastors agreed together that they would not cooperate but continue to live and work in a very tense environment.

Giving aid to those in need, which many pastors consider an integral part of their work, is also risky. One pastor in Cordoba is now working under threat after he helped a young man, a former member of an armed group, to leave the region after he converted to Christianity and decided to demobilise. Another pastor in Caquetá said he had come under threat by FARC guerrillas after he and his wife offered assistance to a destitute IDP woman and her family.

In other cases, pastors were threatened because of their influence over their congregation. One denominational leader told CSW that reason behind the majority of threats made over the past year against pastors in his denomination was that they would not encourage the church youth to join the armed groups, and in some cases encouraged or helped them to leave the region to avoid forced recruitment. One pastor from the same denomination received death threats after he held a special service to pray for peace; members of a paramilitary group were listening and were apparently unhappy with this message. The denominational leader has also come under threat, despite living in another part of the country, because of the support he had given the pastors and because of his visits to the region.

Unfortunately, in some cases pastors came under threat because of actions by the Colombian military. In one part of the country, pastors reported being publicly approached by soldiers asking that they work with them and act as informants. There is a strong

presence of guerrillas in the area, who often pose as civilians, and the pastors complained that even though they asked the soldiers to allow them to remain neutral, the simple act of being observed talking to government forces is often sufficient “evidence” for the FARC to label them as collaborators. Another group of pastors in Cauca expressed their frustration that the military frequently insisted on using church facilities, including the church buildings, to base their operations. This again, had the effect of making them supporters of “the enemy” in the eyes of the guerrillas and thus legitimate military targets, even though they had not given their consent and had in fact expressly asked the military not to use their facilities.²

9. Forcible recruitment of young people

Colombia has one of the highest numbers of child soldiers in the world. The government puts the official figure at 8,000 but human rights experts believe the actual number is around 11,000. All of the armed groups, both guerrillas and paramilitaries, count minors among their ranks. While the right to conscientious objection was upheld by the Colombian courts last year, the military and police frequently use children as message runners or informants, putting those children in serious danger.

Many young people join, enticed by the prospect of a salary and other benefits, particularly in the rural and impoverished regions of the country where the armed groups hold sway. However, a large percentage of child soldiers, including Christian youth whose beliefs clash with the activities and ideologies of the armed groups, have been compelled against their will to join. In some cases, they have been kidnapped and impressed into the armed groups. In other cases, threats have been made against the families if they do not hand over their children to the armed group. One young man, a former member of a paramilitary group in Northern Colombia told CSW, “The paras came to our house. They said that in a house with two children, one could stay but one had to go. In a house with three children, one could stay and two should go. They came to us but we refused. Then they killed my father and my brother so I went.”

Pastors in all parts of the country consistently told CSW that their most pressing problem was the recruitment of their young people into armed groups. As mentioned in section five, a denominational leader told CSW this year that the main reason for the threats against their pastors was their support for young people who resisted recruitment into the armed groups. A pastor from the Panamericana church in Southern Colombia told CSW that all children over the age of ten in his church had to be sent away to avoid being taken. A similar situation was reported again and again to CSW this year by pastors in Caquetá, Arauca, Norte de Santander, Cordoba, Antioquia, Cauca, Meta, Tolima, Huila and Putumayo. Pastors from the Nasa-Paez people group in Cauca representing a number of different churches expressed concern that children as young as nine years old were being recruited into the FARC. Children who had managed to escape reported being shot at by the guerrillas.

Removing children who have been forcibly incorporated into the armed groups is risky for all parties involved. A thirteen-year-old girl from the Alianza Colombiana Church, who has been a member of a paramilitary group for two years, told our partners that she was too afraid to leave because she feared for the life of her mother. Her mother was almost killed in April and in order to protect her, the girl was forced to return and work with the paramilitaries.

² It should be noted that all of the illegal armed groups also regularly force churches to allow them to use their facilities. One pastor told CSW that FARC guerrillas regularly demanded the use of church vehicles and even insisted that members of the church chauffeur them. This, of course, put civilians at risk of being considered guerrilla collaborators by the military or other armed groups.

In some cases, churches have managed to rescue young people who have been forced into the armed groups. Because of the danger of retaliation against them and their families, however, the children and families are usually forced to flee the region and go into hiding. In one case in Antioquia, Jessica, a teenager, began to receive threatening phone calls after her sister, who had been forcibly recruited, failed to return to a paramilitary group after being given medical leave for an illness. Despite the fact that Jessica, a member of the Interamericana Church, had no idea where her sister had gone the paramilitaries told her that if she failed to answer for her sister, she would be killed.

10. Converts within the armed groups

The armed groups do not make it easy for members of their groups to leave the ranks. In most cases, choosing to lay down one's weapons is seen as the act of a traitor. Defectors usually have to flee or go into hiding to avoid being killed. CSW has received reports of converts to Christianity within the armed groups who have been threatened and killed because of their subsequent decision to renounce violence. It is worth noting that a few members of the FARC reportedly converted to Christianity after hearing Pastor Manuel Camacho preach in Caqueta. This is believed to be one of the motives behind his assassination, mentioned in Section one.

Christians who leave the armed groups are frequently forced to live the rest of their lives in hiding or under an assumed name out of fear of retaliation from their former group. CSW heard the story of a member of the FARC who had defected and fled to another part of the country. She received support from a local church in her city of refuge but began to receive phone calls from her former commanders. They demanded that she return and threatened members of her family who still lived in the region, which is under the guerrilla group's control. According to members of the church who worked with her, she returned with her baby out of fear for the lives of her family members and had not been heard from since. They believe she has probably been killed for being a traitor.

The consequences for those who choose to leave the armed groups are also illustrated in the tragic case of Pastor Walter Arrollo, who disappeared along with his pregnant wife and two children in autumn 2009. Pastor Arrollo was formerly a commander in the ELN guerrilla group but converted to Christianity in 1993 while serving a 60-year prison sentence. He became a pastor while still in prison and after serving fifteen years of his sentence was released on parole because of good behaviour. At the time of his disappearance he was working as a pastor in Barranquilla and also carrying out prison ministry.

The entire family disappeared en route to the city of Cúcuta on 24 September 2009. Their belongings, including Pastor Arroyo's Bible, were found but the family's fate is unknown. Pastor Arroyo's mother informed CSW's partners that he had received threats from the ELN but that despite this, he had never given any indication that he thought his life was at risk. The ELN threatened him, according to his mother, "because he had become a Christian and left the group and in addition was evangelising and bringing Christ to many guerrillas serving prison sentences who were now servants of God." The case has been registered with the public prosecutor's office.

Former members of the armed groups who have participated in official demobilisation programmes have also come under fire from groups which have illegally reformed in recent years. This year CSW met with a demobilised former member of the AUC paramilitary group. Originally from Cordoba, he became a Christian after participating in the government sponsored demobilisation programme. Over the past few years, members of his former group have begun to rearm and form new paramilitary groups. He refused their invitation to join, explaining that he had become a Christian. The group threatened to kill him and his

family if he did not return and he and his young family were forced to flee to another part of the country and to go into hiding.

11. Restricted movement

Christians, and in particular, pastors, continue to report that their movements are severely restricted by the armed groups. In some cases, they are totally prohibited from leaving their town or village, curtailing any freedom of movement. This is mostly a problem in regions where an armed group has established control over the area. Civilians must request official permission from the relevant armed group to travel in or out.

This poses a particular problem for rural pastors who often oversee multiple churches or Christian groups in various small communities. In many cases, Christian groups are left without a leader because their pastor is prohibited from travelling to meet them. Others report the opposite problem of civilians living in neighbouring hamlets prohibited from going into the town to attend church.

Pastors seeking to attend regional religious meetings or denominational conferences reported being denied permission to leave the area. The majority of reports of restricted or prohibited movement received by CSW occurred in areas under the control of the FARC, though all armed groups regularly restrict movement to control the civilian population. Even when they are granted permission, levels of intimidation are high. One pastor told CSW that he was stopped at a guerrilla checkpoint last year on his way to attend a denominational meeting. When he explained where he was going, he was told he would be given permission but to, "Watch what you say there because we know everything even before you utter the words". The pastor was so frightened that although he attended the meeting, he did not speak.

The incidence of this type of violation is believed to be very high. However, many of the affected populations have lived their entire lives under this type of control and do not recognise it as abnormal and as a result fail to report it as a violation. One church leader told CSW that human rights violations like this had been assimilated into local cultures to such an extent that it is now incorporated in the local churches' theology, making it extremely difficult for human rights groups to accurately document the extent of the violations.

12. Extortion

Extortion is also an activity carried out by the armed groups on such a wide scale that it is now considered the norm in many communities to pay a regular fee to one or more illegal armed groups present. While individual members of the community are regularly extorted by the armed groups and Christians often face a moral dilemma of whether or not to pay, churches are at particular risk. There is a widespread perception among armed groups that churches, even in rural or impoverished areas, have money. This is partly because of the very public wealth of some "mega-churches" in the cities and also because of an incorrect belief that all churches in Colombia receive funds from international agencies and counterparts. At times, as explained in Section 4, extortion is used to intimidate church leaders into fleeing the region.

Pastors across the country, in both rural and urban areas, reported being subjected to extortion demands. In some cases, armed groups demanded cash, but in other cases specified that the money should be used to buy mobile phone credit. In a number of cases, pastors refused to pay on the basis that it was unethical to hand over funds donated by members of the congregation for "God's work" to armed groups engaged in illegal and violent activities. As a result of their refusal to meet the demands of the armed

groups many pastors have received death threats. In some cases, they have been forced to flee.

Of particular concern to CSW is the situation in Maicao, a city located in La Guajira on the Venezuelan border. In 2008, Pastor William Reyes, a member of the Fellowship of Pastors of Maicao (FRAME), was forcibly disappeared after refusing to pay extortion money demanded by an armed group which identified itself as the FARC.³ Over the past year, all of the pastors in FRAME have received extortion demands and are currently under threat. There was no real official investigation into Pastor Reyes' disappearance and high levels of corruption in the city have contributed to a general culture of impunity. CSW and our partners have serious concerns for the well-being of pastors in Maicao.

13. Context

Colombia has been torn apart by violence for almost five decades, beginning with the rise of multiple leftist guerrilla groups in the 1960s and 1970s and, over the last twenty years, the growth of right-wing paramilitary armed groups. These groups all employ similar tactics of violence and intimidation as they vie for power and territory - in terms of land, the narcotics trade and other economic interests. For its part, the Colombian military has often taken an ambiguous position concerning violence between the different groups and has repeatedly been accused of either passively siding with or actively fighting alongside right-wing paramilitary groups.

In November 1998, former President Andrés Pastrana Arango created a demilitarised zone of five districts in southern Colombia and ceded an area the size of Switzerland to the largest leftist guerrilla group, FARC-EP (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*), as part of new peace talks. The FARC-EP, however, used the safe zone to consolidate their authority in the region and as a base from which to continue to carry out violent and illegal activities. During this period, their numbers swelled significantly. Human rights violations within the areas under their control were rampant, and churches in particular reported severe repression and the outright persecution of Christian leaders and communities.

There was a strong public rejection of the Pastrana government policies in relation to the conflict. Following his administration, Alvaro Uribe, was elected on a hard-line platform. One of his first steps was to give the military the approval to retake the areas ceded to the guerrilla groups by Pastrana. Although this secured some areas and put the FARC-EP on the defensive, it has also led to increased conflict and displacement.

Under Uribe, the Colombian military was repeatedly accused of human rights atrocities. In 2009, the widespread military practice of killing civilians and passing them off as guerrillas killed in combat was exposed. This, in turn, led to promises by the government, which denied the reports for years that prosecutions of those responsible would be carried out.

While pursuing a military solution against the FARC-EP, and entering into somewhat sporadic and thus far unsuccessful preliminary consultations to discuss a possible peace talks with the ELN (*Ejército Liberación Nacional*) President Uribe committed the state to a peaceful demobilisation programme with right-wing paramilitary groups, in particular the AUC (*Auto-Defensas Unidas de Colombia*). It is important to note, however, that a number of paramilitary organisations refused to participate in the demobilisation process. There have been numerous criticisms and questions regarding this process, especially because of long-standing

³ There are doubts as to whether the extortionists were actual FARC guerrillas or rather a paramilitary group posing as the FARC.

allegations of cooperation between the Colombian military and the paramilitary organisations.

In addition, the “para-political” scandal which was first publicly exposed in 2006 continues to widen, and more than sixty politicians from Uribe’s government coalition stand accused of having direct links to paramilitary organisations. There have also been strong criticisms coming from the demobilised paramilitary commanders themselves, who accuse the government of not living up to its side of the bargain. Promises on the part of the government to offer training and education to demobilised members of paramilitary groups were reportedly not implemented in any uniform way.

Although the Uribe government regularly asserted that the programme has been a success and paramilitarism no longer existed in the country, it is clear that this is simply untrue. Paramilitary groups were responsible for 500 documented human rights violations in 2007, the highest number since 1996 and four years after demobilisation took place.⁴ One “demobilised” paramilitary commander met with CSW in early 2007 to explain his unhappiness with what he perceived to be failures on the part of the government in the demobilisation process, only to be rearrested the following year for remobilising; a fact which in itself belies government claims.⁵ Over the past two years, CSW has seen a steep rise in reported threats and attacks against church leaders at the hands of re-emergent paramilitary groups across the country and particularly in the northern regions which traditionally have been the heart and bastion of paramilitarism.

At the same time, while the government continues to publicly proclaim its success in fighting the guerrilla groups, grassroots human rights defenders in the parts of the country where these groups are present tell a different story. In spite of some significant military victories and the deaths of a number of key members of the FARC-EP secretariat over the past three years, the FARC-EP and the ELN still wield control in some parts of the country. In addition, both guerrilla groups maintain a presence in government controlled areas, including major cities and conflict zones. Serious human rights violations at the hands of both leftist guerrilla groups continue to be reported and documented. Church leaders living in guerrilla controlled territory told CSW this year, they had seen no advances on the part of the government security forces and their perception was that the guerrillas, in particular the FARC, were more in control than ever before. There is no question that the FARC has been weakened and pushed back into more remote parts of the country, but it seems to be attempting to solidify its control over those areas where it still maintains a strong presence.

Rather than streamlining the conflict, the demobilisation programme, or rather, its failure has made the situation even more complex and convoluted. At times, the two main leftist guerrilla groups, the FARC-EP and the ELN, have forged “partnerships” as they continue to battle the government. Since “demobilising,” paramilitary groups have splintered into factions and now often fight each other, as well as the guerrillas, for territory and control of the drug trade and other industries. In some parts of the country CSW contacts report that local guerrilla units and paramilitary blocs have actually formed alliances, divvying up territory and cooperating in the drug trade. Over the past few years, much of the activity of the different armed groups has been focused on strategically important and financially lucrative regions of the country. There are consistent reports of forced displacement at the hands of all the groups in these areas.

⁴Wood, Rachel; “Overview of the Colombian Conflict from a Human Rights-Based Methodological Perspective.” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs* 28 July 2009; <http://www.coha.org/2009/07/overview-of-the-colombian-conflict-from-a-human-rights-based-methodological-perspective/>

⁵ See CSW Colombia Visit Report January 2007 <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=67>

The recently elected president, Juan Manuel Santos, has thus far taken what seems to be a more moderate approach. While maintaining a military offensive against the guerrillas he has also reached out to the leftist governments of neighbouring countries with whom his predecessor maintained an antagonistic relationship. His government has responded quickly to allegations of human rights violations carried out by members of the Colombian security forces and seems to also be seeking to address the complex problem of the re-emergent paramilitary groups. While it is very early to judge the Santos administration, early indications seem positive.

14. Background and explanatory note

CSW has been investigating religious persecution in Colombia and exploring ways of supporting grassroots initiatives since our first visit to the country in autumn 2003. In late 2004, CSW established a formal partnership with the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace (CRVP) of the Colombian Federation of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL) in a joint project with Justapaz, a Mennonite human rights organisation, to build capacity within the Colombian churches to carry out political advocacy initiatives and to provide a structure through which to provide support to the victims of human rights abuses in the country. Over the past few years the CRVP and Justapaz have gathered evidence of widespread violations of religious liberty across the country. The cases are investigated, recorded and compiled by grassroots volunteers who have been trained in documentation and advocacy and do this work at great personal risk.

The project has not gone unnoticed. In 2007, the Justapaz office in Bogota, where the database on human rights violations was compiled and stored, was the subject of a highly professional break-in. Those responsible stole the computer hard drives where human rights violations had been saved and which contained extremely sensitive information on individual cases, leaving other more valuable equipment behind. To date, no one has been identified as responsible for the crime and our partners have had very minimal feedback from the Attorney General's office on progress in the investigation.

Much of the information on the human rights situation in Colombia, and in particular specific violations of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, in this report is sourced from CRVP and Justapaz reports and documentation projects.⁶ CSW also carried out three fact-finding visits over the past year and conducted interviews with denominational and church leaders as well as victims of human rights violations. Individual human rights defenders, Colombian legal experts, members of indigenous communities and human rights organisations have also contributed information to this report. Most cannot be named for security reasons.

Cases of human rights violations are given as examples throughout this report, however, many are intentionally kept vague. CSW's first commitment is to the people on whose behalf we work and therefore specific details are only given in cases which have already been made public, where those involved have given CSW permission to do so, and where there is no danger to the people involved. The security situation in most of the regions covered in this report, however, remains extremely precarious. Because of this, in the majority of the cases, specific details are not provided so as not to put people's lives at risk. Despite the lack of detail made public in the report, every case mentioned below has been documented and verified using strict criteria.

It should also be noted that where numbers of documented cases are given, it can be assumed that the number of actual cases is likely to be much higher. Documenting and

⁶ English and Spanish versions of all Justapaz and CRVP reports, "A Prophetic Call", which is produced on an annual basis, can be found on the Justapaz website at www.justapaz.org

verifying ongoing human rights violations in areas under the control of or dominated by the illegal armed groups, who are responsible for most of the violations, is extremely difficult for a number of reasons. These include the geographic isolation of many of the communities where victims live. There are also considerable risks both for the victims giving information on the crimes committed against them and their loved ones and for the men and women carrying out the firsthand documentation necessary for this project. A large number of victims are too fearful to speak out or to report violations of human rights because of the likely repercussions, meaning a significant number of cases go unreported and undocumented. In addition, there are many communities which cannot be visited or contacted because of their physical isolation and because it is simply too dangerous both for the victims and for those attempting to document or verify their cases.

15. Conclusion

The scale of the conflict and the numbers of its victims can be overwhelming. However, when analysing the situation and breaking down the demographics of the men, women and children affected by the conflict, it is clear that certain groups of people and communities are particularly and consistently targeted by the different armed groups. Some, for example members of indigenous and afro-Colombian communities, are often targeted because of who they are and where they live. Others, like trade unionists, journalists and human rights defenders are targeted because of what they do. Christian leaders, communities of faith and the individual members of those communities are targeted, across the country for all of these reasons. In some cases, they are targeted for no other reason than what they believe. In others, they are targeted because of how those beliefs translate into the way they live.

Violations of religious freedom take place on a daily basis in Colombia. However, because of the difficulties and dangers in documenting and reporting these cases, alongside the apparent freedom of worship enjoyed by Christians in many more visible parts of the country, the situation is underreported and receives little attention. The documentation of these violations, however, is a major step forward in raising awareness both in and outside the country. The fact that men and women are willing to risk their lives to document these cases and that victims are increasingly finding the courage to speak out despite the potentially horrific repercussions of reporting their cases is, in itself, evidence of how critical they believe their situation to be. Now that the situation has been made known, thanks to their work, responsibility falls to leaders in and outside Colombia to ensure that their calls for true religious freedom and freedom of conscience do not go unheeded.