

briefing

Colombia

CSW visit to Colombia

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1. Summary

CSW has been investigating religious persecution in Colombia and exploring ways of supporting grassroots initiatives to give the Colombian Church a voice since its first fact-finding trip 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) to build capacity within the Colombian Church for political advocacy initiatives and to provide a formal structure in which to provide support to the Suffering Church in that country. With the support of our partners at the CRVP, CSW has gathered evidence of widespread violations of religious liberty across the country.

2. Introduction

Colombia has been torn apart by violence for more than four decades due to the rise of multiple leftist guerrilla groups, and over the last twenty years, the growth of right-wing paramilitary armed groups. These groups all employ similar violence and intimidation as they vie for power and territory - both in terms of land and the narcotics trade. At times, the two main leftist guerrilla groups, the FARC and the ELN, have reportedly forged "partnerships" as they continue to battle the government. Others, like the rightwing AUC, have splintered into factions as some blocs accept a ceasefire and others do not and now often fight amongst themselves, as well as against the guerrillas. In some parts of the country, CSW contacts report that local guerrilla units and paramilitary blocs had actually formed alliances, divvying up territory and cooperating in the drug trade.

The Colombian military has itself often taken an ambiguous position in regard to violence between the different groups, and at times, allegedly, either passively sides with or actively fights alongside rightwing paramilitary groups.¹

In November 1998, former President Pastrana created a demilitarized zone of five districts in southern Colombia and ceded an area the size of Switzerland to the FARC as part of new peace talks. The current president, Alvaro Uribe, however, was elected on a hardline platform. One of his first steps was to give the military the approval to retake the areas ceded to the guerrilla groups by Pastrana. While this has made some areas safer, it has also led to increased conflict and displacement.

Uribe has committed the Colombian government to high level peace talks with the AUC (the largest confederacy of paramilitary groups) which have received a great deal of criticism from human rights groups at home and abroad. As part of these talks, the government has given the AUC a "safe zone" in the area of Santa Fe de Ralito. In the last year the paramilitaries have carried out at least one public assassination inside a church during a service in the surrounding areas.

In spite of the military offensive across the country, both the FARC and the ELN control significant parts of the country and maintain a strong, if more discreet, presence in government controlled areas and conflict zones.

¹ At one point on the trip the CSW delegation directly witnessed cooperation between paramilitaries and the military. Shortly after the conclusion of the trip, the military was implicated in a massacre that took place at a peace community a short distance from where the activity was witnessed.

3. Religious Freedom

3.1. Conflict Related Religious Persecution

3.1.1. Persecution at the hands of Guerrillas

FARC, which adheres to Marxist doctrine, has shut down many Christian churches and forbade pastors from preaching the gospel in areas under their control, accusing them of being agents of the "capitalist system". In addition, entire Christian communities have often been forced to leave their towns, adding to the number of internally displaced person inside the country - which most official estimates put at around 3 million people.

The reasons behind the expulsions of Christians seems to be that the armed groups perceive Christians, as a group, to be "uncooperative" with their policies, which often include participation in the cultivation of coca, compulsory attendance of indoctrination meetings, and recruitment of young people into their forces. Many communities are still displaced (some for years) and while some churches have reopened, a significant number (approximately 40 have been reported) remain closed.

Many pastors living in these areas continue to report severe restrictions on religious freedom and some have received death threats. CSW met one such pastor in a city in Southern Colombian city who had been given an ultimatum by the FARC only the day before the meeting. He refused to use church funds, donated by its impoverished members, to pay the "protection money" demanded by the local FARC leadership. As a result they had warned him that he was putting his life and the lives of his family, including several children, at risk. This appears to be a common issue facing countless pastors and church leaders across the country.

A public assassination attempt, which has been attributed to the FARC, took place in a church during a prayer service in Puerto Asis at the end of 2004. While the target of the assassination survived the attack despite grave wounds, four others present at the church did not, and a number suffered serious and permanent injuries including paralysis. Following the attack, the local CRVP representative was also forcibly taken by FARC and warned, under threat of death, not to leave the area. CSW was unable to meet with him because of the threats and was advised that the CRVP considers his situation to be of the utmost seriousness.

It appears that a FARC order, identifying Protestant pastors as legitimate military targets, is still in effect. Since 2000 more than 150 pastors and church leaders have been assassinated.

3.1.2. Persecution at the hands of Paramilitaries

Paramilitary groups are also heavily involved in narco-trafficking and extortion. Church leaders who speak out publicly against the violence, injustice, corruption, and the narcotics trade perpetuated by paramilitary forces often become instant targets. Christian business owners and church leaders who refuse to pay the "vacuna", protection money demanded by paramilitary groups, are often threatened with death.

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 have made the decision to defect, has been designated a valid military objective by high-level commanders in each of the armed groups including the paramilitaries. This, of course, has obvious implications for pastors and evangelists. Christians who are involved in human rights work or peace initiatives are particular targets.

The paramilitary groups are also guilty of carrying out public assassinations in places of worship, during church services. CSW visited the site of one such assassination in a church in Northern Colombia. The paramilitaries had entered during a worship service, pulled their target from the congregation and shot him to death in the aisle.

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.

3.1.3. Forced Recruitment of Youth

All of the armed groups forcibly recruit young people into their ranks. Those that cannot be lured with promises of a regular salary and personal weapons often find themselves and/or their family threatened with death if they do not join. While Christian youth are not by any means the only young people affected by this policy, they often find themselves in a particularly difficult situation because their religious beliefs make them morally averse to participating in such groups. Often, their only option is to flee the area and seek refuge in another part of the country. CSW has received reports of Christian youth being murdered or forcibly taken by the armed groups after refusing their efforts at recruitment.

3.2. 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. Other Christians, who had held high ranking positions in the armed forces, told CSW that they had been demoted or forced out when it was discovered that they were Evangelicals.

Church representatives from all parts of Colombia told CSW of systematic discrimination on the part of local governments (usually mayors and town councils). These often consisted of refusals to rent buildings or rooms for places of worship to Protestant groups, forcible closure of church buildings (usually put down to noise complaints), unreasonable demands being made on Protestant churches², and the exclusion of Protestant groups from receiving government funds designated for local social projects. Some church leaders reported acts of

² In one example a 40 year old church in one town was required to raise its walls to 5 metres and soundproof the walls within 30 days to block out noise; this was not only economically impossible for the church, particularly when considering the time limit, but also resulted in the collapse of some of the walls, which were actually joined to the neighbouring houses, causing the church even more difficulties

violence against individuals or property used by local Protestant groups. Most of this was put down to pressure from either the local Roman Catholic authorities, or from particularly zealous Roman Catholic local government officials.

The government's usual response to this type of discrimination is to put it down to problems with local governments, pointing to the allowances for religious freedom and equality in the national constitution. However, after visiting all five regions of Colombia and hearing practically the same list of abuses in every town visited, it was clear that while the abuses may be perpetrated by local officials, it is clearly a national problem and as such must be addressed by the federal government. The federal government cannot be allowed to sidestep responsibility by putting the blame on local officials, when it appears that local officials across the country are acting in a distinctly similar manner which is contrary to the rights guaranteed in the Colombia Constitution; a manner that thus far has been tolerated, or at the least, ignored by federal officials.

3.3. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Related Issues

3.3.1. Conflict Related Religious Persecution

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 relative 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.

3.3.2. Legal Threat to Religious Liberty

During the course of this trip CSW met with leaders from indigenous communities, representing more than 30,000 Christians, who shared with CSW their concern regarding a "Law of Autonomy", currently being considered by the Colombian government. This law would basically create a country within a country, allowing indigenous communities to live under their own systems of authority, which, in theory, appears to be a positive step. However, there is a particular clause, relating to religion, which would in effect disenfranchise any member of the indigenous communities who chose not to follow "traditional religions".

Under the Law of Autonomy, traditional religious leaders would have the authority to force all members of the community to participate in traditional religious ceremonies. Should they not wish to do so, as most of the Christians have said they would not, the community leaders would have the right, under their own law, to punish or banish them. This clearly is in violation of international standards on human rights and would have devastating implications for indigenous Colombians who follow the Christian faith.

While the indigenous leaders were not adverse to the idea of a Law of Autonomy, they emphasise the need for any system of governance to protect their fundamental human rights as guaranteed by international treaties and law.

4. Purposes of visit

This was CSW's third trip to Colombia. This visit had the following objectives:

1. To visit all five regions of the country in which CSW partner, the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace (CRVP) of the Colombian Federation of Evangelical Churches, is working in order to gain an awareness of the situation facing the church in all parts of the country.
2. To introduce the President of the European Parliament Working Group on Relations with Colombia to the issues facing the Church in Colombia
3. To consolidate the partnership with the CRVP, to assess their work and current needs and to demonstrate our continuing solidarity with them.
4. To continue to build on personal relationships with the directive committee of the CRVP, visiting each regional coordinator in their centre of operations to better understand the circumstances in which they work.
5. To meet with church leaders across the country to demonstrate solidarity and to explain the relationship between CSW and the CRVP and to encourage them to continue to support and involve themselves in CRVP unity, peace and human rights initiatives.
6. To meet with the president of the Colombian Network of Christian Lawyers and to carry out an advocacy workshop with local lawyers and other community leaders under his supervision.

5. Personnel

Anna-Lee Stangl	CSW-EU Liaison Officer and Research and Advocacy Officer for Latin America
Susan Kerr (Week 1 only)	President of the European Parliament Working Group on Relations with Colombia

6. Itinerary

4 February	Brussels to Bogota
5 – 8 February	Bogota
9 February	Barrancabermeja
10 February	Apartadó and Medellín
11 February	Bogota (Susan Kerr departs)
12 February	Sogamoso
13 February	Sogamoso to Bogota
14 February	Bogota
15 February	Ibagué and Líbano
16 February	Neiva
17 February	Cali

18 February	Armenia
19 February	Pereira
20 February	Pereira
21 February	Río Negro
22 February	Río Negro
23 February	Río Negro and Medellín
24 February	Barranquilla
25 February	Barranquilla
26 February	Sincelejo
27 February	Tierra Alta
28 February	Montería
1 March	Bogota
2 March	Bogota - Brussels

7. Summary of Meetings

7.1. Central Region

CSW took part in meetings with the following:

- The National Directive Committee of the CRVP
- The Regional Directive Committee for the CRVP Central Region
- Panels of church leaders representing
 - Sogamoso,
 - Yupal,
 - Chiquinquirá,
 - Tunja, and
 - Barrancabermeja
- The Colombian advocacy liaison for Open Doors (Vision Agape in Colombia)

7.2. Tolima and Caquetá

CSW took part in meetings with the following:

- The CRVP Regional Coordinator for Tolima and Caquetá
- The CRVP Regional Women's Network Coordinator for Tolima and Caquetá
- Panels of church leaders representing:
 - Neiva and
 - Líbano
- The Coalition of Christian Internally Displaced Women of La Modelia Community in Ibagué

CSW visited the IDP communities: Villa del Sol, La Modelia and La Martinica

7.3. South West

CSW took part in meetings with the following:

- The Regional Directive Committee for the South West
 - Including the incoming and outgoing coordinators
- Panels of church leaders representing
 - The Paez/Nasa Indigenous Community
 - Cali
 - Pereira
 - Armenia
- The Regional Red Cross Director for the Coffee Growing Region (“Eje Cafetero”)

7.4. Antioquia and Choco

CSW took part in meetings with the following:

- The CRVP Regional Coordinator for Antioquia and Choco
- Panels of church leaders representing
 - Apartadó
 - Turbo
 - Chigorodó
 - Medellín (Commune 13)

7.5. Coastal Region

CSW took part in meetings with the following:

- The CRVP National Director
- The CRVP Regional Coordinator for the Coastal Region
- The CRVP Advocacy Coordinator for the Coastal Region (also the Colombian Network of Christian Lawyers President and the Director of the Bethesda Foundation)
- Panels of church leaders from
 - Sincelejo
 - Montería
 - Tierra Alta

CSW visited the IDP communities: Loma Roja, Villa Luz, Villa Madera and Nueva Esperanza

7.6. Advocacy Workshops

CSW conducted advocacy workshops with the following

- Community and church leaders from
 - Cordoba,
 - Loma Roja (Barranquilla) and
 - Zambrano
 - Pereira
 - The Paez Indigenous Group
 - Armenia
 - Sogamoso

7.7. Other Meetings

CSW attended the annual assembly of the Colombian Federation of Evangelical Churches held in Rio Negro, Antioquia. While at the assembly, CSW met with:

- The Open Doors Director for Latin America (Ricardo Luna)
- Church leaders from La Guajira (North East Colombia)
- Ex-Military Personnel (forced out of the military for being an Evangelical)

8. Recommendations

8.1.1. To the Colombian Government

- While CSW recognises that the internal conflict in Colombia often 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 civilian non-combatants, in the areas under their control as well as in conflict zones.
- CSW also calls on the Colombian government to ensure that any law of autonomy to be granted to indigenous communities across the country guarantee the protection of their internationally recognised human rights, including the right to choose and practice the faith of their choice.
- While CSW welcomes moves towards religious equality in Colombia, CSW also reminds the Colombian Federal Government of its responsibility to ensure that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution be observed and upheld across the country by all authorities including local governments. CSW encourages all levels of government to eliminate discrimination in the areas under their authority on the basis of religion or denomination.

8.1.2. To the Armed Actors

- CSW calls on all armed actors in the internal conflict to abide by international standards of human rights and to work actively towards peace.
- CSW calls on the leaders of all of the armed groups to respect the rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience of all Colombians, and particularly requests that they respect the sanctity of places of worship.
- CSW calls upon the armed groups to cease the recruitment of minors and to respect the right of men and women of all ages not to join or to leave their ranks.
- CSW calls upon all armed groups to eliminate policies of extortion and particularly to respect the right of churches not to pay “vacuna” out of monies donated to the church by its members in good faith that it will be used for Christian work.
- CSW calls upon the FARC leadership to publicly renounce their designation of Evangelical pastors and church leaders as military targets and to communicate this to all divisions of the FARC.
- CSW calls on the armed groups to allow church leaders, human rights defenders and those involved in peace initiatives to carry out their work without hindrance or threat from their members.

8.1.3. To the United Kingdom, the European Union, United Nations and the United States:

- CSW calls on the UK, the EU, the UN and the USA to encourage President Uribe to ensure that human rights are respected by government forces and agents and that religious freedom and equality is guaranteed and upheld for all faiths.
- CSW also calls upon the UK government, the EU, the UN and the USA 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 and the EU to consistently and clearly communicate this concern to the Colombian government.
- Furthermore, should an opportunity for an active dialogue with the different armed groups arise, CSW calls on the UK government, the EU, the UN and the USA, to use its influence to encourage those groups to respect freedom of conscience and faith in the areas under their control or influence.
- Lastly, CSW calls on the UK government, the EU, the UN and the USA to express their support for the fundamental right of freedom of religion for all peoples to the Colombian government and to call on the Colombian government to ensure that

any law of autonomy to be applied to indigenous communities uphold those principles.

8.1.4. International Donors and Investors

- CSW calls on all multi-national corporations with business interests in Colombia to seek ways to uphold and encourage the respect for human rights in that country, particularly by reinvesting profits back into the communities in which they work, to encourage education, development and peaceful resolution to conflict.
- CSW also calls upon any agencies or governments providing financial aid to Colombia to ensure that that aid is used in the designated manner and reaches those for whom it is designated.