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COLOMBIA | Activists Raise Religious Freedom Concerns With US Policymakers

Two Colombian activists met with US policymakers last week to raise concerns about freedom of religion or belief in Colombia and presented a report outlining five categories of religious freedom violations.

As part of a visit facilitated by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Angelica Rincon Alonso of the Mennonite peace and justice organization Justapaz and the Colombian Council of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL) Peace Commission, along with conscientious objector Jhonatan Vargas, briefed State Department officials, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and staffers from the Senate and House.

Rincon Alonso presented a report which outlined five categories of religious freedom violations. The first two thematic areas are the extortion of pastors and churches, and assassinations of and threats against religious leaders, mostly carried out by neo-paramilitary organizations. CEDECOL and Justapaz have documented 336 murders of and 880 threats against church leaders over a ten-year period. Rincon Alonso also raised the severe restrictions on or prohibitions of religious activity imposed by illegal armed groups, highlighting the case of Putumayo where the FARC (a left-wing guerrilla group) have prohibited any religious activity in rural areas. Earlier this year, two pastors from the United Pentecostal Denomination of Colombia were murdered by the guerrillas.

Jhonatan Vargas, a university student and active member of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Barrancabermeja, gave his personal testimony of the fourth category of religious freedom violations. After declaring himself a conscientious objector, Vargas was forcibly inducted into the military and held for three months. He opted not to return after being granted a leave of absence and the military filed charges of desertion against him. His case reached Colombia's highest court, the Constitutional Court. In September, he was imprisoned, and the military moved to bring him to trial. Fifteen days after his imprisonment, the Constitutional Court upheld his right to conscientious objection, and he was released.

Vargas told US policymakers he was lucky to have the support of national and international organizations, but he saw many others in the same situation during his time in the military. He asked that the US put pressure on the Colombian government to ensure the military takes concrete steps to uphold and raise awareness of the right to conscientious objection within its ranks.

Rincon Alonso also expressed concern that religious minorities, including Protestant churches,

are not being given access to participate in forums set up to allow civil society to feed into the peace dialogues between the government and the FARC in Havana. While seats at the forums have been set aside for 'religious groups', the United National Development Programme and the National University, which are in charge of choosing participants, have kept the religious sector exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church. Complaints to UN agencies in Colombia have received no response. She expressed concern that the active role of Protestant churches in defending victims of the armed conflict as well as the impact of the conflict on Protestant churches is being rendered invisible.

"We do not deny that there are strong and clear protections for freedom of religion and conscience in the Colombian constitution and in our legal norms. In practice, however, freedom of religion is violated on a regular basis by both state and non-state actors. This issue has not been and is not a priority for the government," she said.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW was honored to host and facilitate the Washington DC visit of these two defenders of freedom of religion and conscience. They give voice to the suffering of many more Colombians who experience violations of their religious freedom on a regular basis. While the conflict in Colombia is complex and there are human rights problems of all kinds, we echo the call of Angelica and Jhonatan that defending and upholding freedom of religion or belief must be a priority for the government. Many of these violations are inextricably linked to the armed conflict and so we continue to call for a negotiated peace and for justice for the victims."