



7.13.15

COLOMBIA | Protestant Delegation Visits U.S.

A delegation of Colombian Protestants is visiting U.S. policymakers in Washington, D.C. this week to raise concerns about ongoing violations of freedom of religion and conscience in Colombia. They are also drawing attention to a recent letter signed by 26 faith leaders in Colombia calling for a negotiated peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group.

The delegation represents Justapaz, a Mennonite peace and justice non-governmental organization, and the Colombian Council of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL) Peace Commission, who were among the signatories to the letter. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and the Mennonite Central Committee are hosting the delegation, who is meeting with members of the U.S. Congress, the State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to raise their concerns about human rights and religious freedom violations committed by state and non-state actors in Colombia.

Jenny Neme, director of Justapaz, a member of the delegation and signatory of the letter, stressed its importance as an indicator of the diversity of religious groups in the country, many of which have a long presence in conflict zones, and called on the Colombian government and the FARC to incorporate them into any long term work for peace and reconciliation. The letter states: “We pray for a possible peace in Colombia and we offer our gifts and talents for the transformation of our country. Not one more life for the war; all lives for peace.”

In addition to the letter, the delegation is raising ongoing violations of freedom of religion and conscience committed by all sides in the conflict. The FARC continues to severely restrict freedom of worship in the region of Putumayo and neo-paramilitary groups regularly target churches for extortion, while the Colombian military continues to forcibly impress young men into the armed forces even after they attempt to declare themselves to be conscientious objectors on the basis of their religious beliefs. The delegation highlighted a recent report published by the Colombian National Ombudsman’s Office on conscientious objection, which calls for the Colombian Congress to pass a law defining and protecting this right.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are delighted to host this Colombian delegation in DC as they make this public call for peace and continue raise an issue that is all too often overlooked due to the complexity of the conflict in Colombia. Human rights of every kind are violated by all the actors in the armed conflict - and freedom of religion and conscience is no exception. We stand alongside the 26 faith leaders in Colombia who have made a public call through this letter for a negotiated peace agreement, and encourage all parties to take up their offer to join efforts to establish peace and reconciliation.”

