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COLOMBIA | Religious Freedom Violations Continue Despite Upcoming Peace Accord

A new report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) highlights ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief in Colombia, which are expected to continue despite this month's anticipated peace agreement between the FARC-EP guerrilla group and the Colombian government.

During a recent fact-finding assignment to the country, CSW met with and interviewed church leaders from five regional departments (similar to provinces or states) where there is a strong presence of illegal armed groups. The church leaders, some of whom were recently forcibly displaced, said severe restrictions on freedom of religion or belief imposed by left-leaning guerrilla groups including the FARC-EP and ELN remain in place. Neo-paramilitary groups, including the Urabeños, also continue to threaten church leaders who refuse to cooperate with them and target churches for extortion. A number of the church leaders reported having received threats from guerrillas and neo-paramilitary groups.

The church leaders told CSW that in the months leading up to the expected peace agreement both the ELN and the Urabeños have been aggressively moving into territories up to now controlled by the FARC-EP. CSW also saw evidence that local FARC-EP commanders are working closely with the ELN and in some cases appear to be handing over power, while some rank and file FARC-EP members are transferring over to the ELN and other illegal armed groups. Church leaders told CSW they expect to see little improvement in their situation whether or not the peace agreement is signed. One indigenous Christian leader said, "The guerrillas are making peace but as I see it, the peace they are making is for over there, but it makes it more complicated here."

These experiences and concerns expressed by church leaders are in line with a study recently published by the Ideas for Peace Foundation (FIP), "Criminal Economies in Light of the Post-Conflict: Current Trends and Proposals to Address Them," which warned that "...the power vacuum that the peace process with the FARC could generate is being filled before the signing of the peace agreement, especially in the municipalities in which it shares presence with other

guerrilla groups and criminal factions of different sorts.”

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, “While CSW welcomes the steps both the government of Colombia and FARC-EP have taken towards the peace agreement, which is due to be signed later this month, we remain deeply concerned at the situation on the ground in many parts of the country. These areas are essentially run by violent illegal armed groups, all of which restrict religious freedom and actively target church leaders. We call on the government of Colombia to take urgent steps to protect civilians and uphold the rule of law in areas of the country where the FARC-EP has until now maintained a strong presence, and we call on the international community to support them in these efforts. To do this, the government of Colombia must take strong action address persistent evidence of corruption and collusion with illegal armed groups by regional and local authorities.”