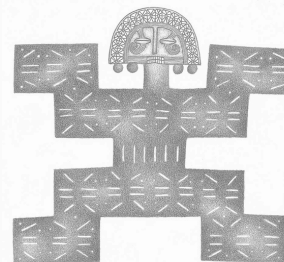


COLOMBIA IN CONTEXT

Colombia in Context is a new bi-monthly publication of the Colombia Human Rights Network, CHRN. CHRN is comprised of committees whose members are all volunteers. We support efforts for peace, human rights, and social justice in Colombia. We work with communities and organizations in Colombia that pursue peace and social justice by peaceful means. As an independent human rights initiative, we are not affiliated in any way with any armed group or political party in Colombia, the United States, or anywhere else. The CHRN was formed in 1990, at which time it adopted the Colombia Update (1989-2003), already being produced by the Colombia Human Rights Committee (Washington, DC), as its own. In the Colombia Update we shared perspectives from human rights defenders and the communities impacted by human rights violations in Colombia. With this first issue of Colombia in Context, we seek once again to provide information and insights to help understand issues in Colombia and U.S.-Colombian relations in light of their impacts on human rights.



In this February 2025 report, we highlight recent events affecting peace and justice in Colombia and provide context.

U.S.-Colombian relations in the age of Trump

The peace processes in Context: The 2016 Peace Accords and La Paz Total

What human rights defenders and social Leaders need: More participation and better protection

ACTION Links: Read more and act to support Colombia's human rights defenders.

1 . U.S.-Colombian relations in the age of Trump

U.S.-Colombian relations became strained at the end of Trump's first week in office. On January 26, President Gustavo Petro prohibited two U.S. deportation flights that had already taken off from landing in Colombia, on grounds that the deportees, who were not proven criminals in Colombia or the United States, were handcuffed and shackled. While Petro has won praise for standing up to Trump and defending migrants' human rights, he has also been criticized for acting impulsively without weighing Trump's possible response. Trump immediately ordered 25% tariffs on all Colombian exports to the United States, to be increased to 50% after one week; Petro announced reciprocal tariff measures. The United States also shut down the consular section at the embassy in Bogotá and announced it would revoke U.S. visas for top government officials. Yet after several hours, the matter was resolved, and no tariffs went into effect. Yet the episode revealed how volatile and unpredictable international relations have become with the new U.S. administration, adding another layer of complexity to Colombia's challenges.

Status of Colombia's Peace Processes

In the ongoing fight to control certain areas of the Catatumbo region in northeast Colombia, violence erupted this past January 16 between the ELN (National Liberation Army) and a dissident group of the FARC. More than 80 people were killed and more than 70,000 displaced. As a result, President Petro suspended talks with the ELN and announced a state of "internal commotion." This has been considered a serious blow to the government's "Paz Total" program. On January 24 the Colombian Army launched an operation against the ELN.

Vera Grabe, a senior government negotiator, and Senator Iván Cepeda, another negotiator, said: "During these months the government has sent the ELN multiple proposals. Today the dialogue process is suspended. Its viability is severely damaged, and its continuity can only be recovered with an unequivocal show of the ELN's will for peace." (El Tiempo 1/17/2025) To understand how Colombia finds itself struggling to establish peace with a growing list of armed groups battling for territorial control, we briefly review how we got here.

Context: What are the 2016 Colombian Peace Accords?

The historic 2016 Colombian Peace Accords ended over 50 years of war between the Colombian government and the FARC guerillas, the country's oldest and then largest guerilla group. The Accords set a 15-year framework for implementing fundamental changes to ensure a lasting peace by addressing the roots of political violence: economic inequality, weak government presence and absence of the rule of law in many regions that instead are controlled by illegal armed actors, and the growth of illegal crop cultivation to finance illegal armed actors. The 2016 Accords lay out a transitional justice framework, economic development including crop substitution, and above all else, respect for human rights, security for Colombia's people, and policies to stop the cycles of violence. Eight years into the 15 years of the accords, some changes have been made: thousands of FARC guerillas have put down their weapons, from 2011 to 2024, the government has returned only 10.5% of the lands allegedly stolen from peasant producers displaced by the violence (665,000 ha, of a total 6.5 million ha), but structural changes to address the roots of the violence have been difficult to implement.

Context: Why la Paz Total, a strategy to expand peace negotiations to all armed actors, is in trouble

The 2016 Peace Accords were with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the largest of several guerilla groups that emerged in Colombia as of the 1960s. President Petro, whose tenure spans August 2022 to August 2026, designed a strategy of “Paz Total” or Total Peace, to pursue peace with other armed actors, including the ELN guerrillas – the largest such force after the 2016 accords – two FARC dissident groups, and large paramilitary groups,[1] like the Clan del Golfo and the Autodefensas Unidas de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Negotiations also started with urban gangs that exercise considerable control in several major cities with histories of violence, like Barrancabermeja, Medellín and Quibdó. Temporary cease fires have been secured with some groups, but the country is experiencing a wave of increased violence.

[1] Paramilitary groups in Colombia have been characterized by violence, corruption, clientelism, drug-trafficking, and working alongside official forces to carry out massacres, selective assassinations, and forced displacement of the civilian population. See: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paramilitarismo_en_Colombia

Roadblocks to further progress in the negotiations include the following:

- The killing of over 432 FARC ex-combatants (as of November 2024) who have put down their weapons has demonstrated Colombia’s limited ability to guarantee safety to those who negotiate. This situation is clearly a disincentive for other armed groups to demobilize.

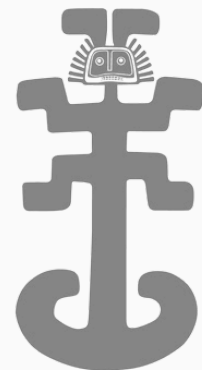
- The administration of Iván Duque (2018-2022) did little to implement the 2016 Peace Accords. The Duque government has been charged with misusing millions of dollars meant for implementing the peace process. President Petro was elected in part as a reaction against the worst abuses of the Duque government, including his response to mostly peaceful demonstrations in Spring 2021 known as the Estallido Social (Social Upheaval). During the demonstrations, police and military attacks against protestors resulted in 44 killings, 35 sexual assaults, 1,661 physical assaults and 2,053 arbitrary detentions, with hundreds of young protesters still in jail today.
- The Petro Administration submitted a 2022-2026 Development Plan that addressed the fundamental requirements of the 2016 Peace Accords, including financing crop substitution, reintegrating ex-combatants, adopting judicial reforms, and returning lands illegally stolen from peasants. Yet major portions of the proposed budget were blocked by the Colombian Congress.

Evaluating La Paz Total

The Bogotá-based research and policy center Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (PARES) has undertaken a detailed review of the Paz Total strategy, “¿Plomo es lo que viene? Balance y retos de la política de paz total, 2022-2024” (<https://www.pares.com.co/plomo-es-lo-que-viene>), which presents a thorough description and analysis of the various illegal armed actors involved and two years of experience pursuing this approach. Among its conclusions:

- Paz Total, while making some headway, has not contained the violence, as extortion and kidnappings have risen. There have been fewer armed actions by the ELN against the Army, fewer casualties due to anti-personnel mines, and easier access for humanitarian groups to high-conflict areas. Yet in such areas, like northern Cauca, the homicide rate is eight times the national average. Kidnappings climbed from 223 in 2022 to 338 in 2023.
- Paz Total established negotiation processes with nine armed groups, including seven rounds with the ELN, the most progress with the ELN any time in recent decades. However, Paz total negotiations do not have a clear road map.
- The largest paramilitary group, the Clan del Golfo (also known as Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, or Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia) has expanded its power. PARES describes it as “a criminal holding company,” as it works with many smaller criminal groups, with a presence in 316 of Colombia’s 1,104 municipalities.
- Paz Total negotiations with urban gangs have made some progress in Medellín, and much less in Quibdó.[2]

[2] A recent article from El País includes a table, from the PARES study, listing the nine dialogues and the various groups involved. <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2025-01-06/plomo-es-lo-que-viene-un-balance-a-dos-anos-de-la-paz-total.html>



There’s an emerging consensus in Colombia that it will be virtually impossible, in the remaining year-and-a-half of the current administration, to meet the goals initially set for peace. Government negotiator Vera Grabe has recently stated that the objective is to ensure that the dialogues advance to a point of no return: “It should be guaranteed, through a framework agreement and the routes that are proposed, that this process will have continuity.”

Human Rights Defenders and Social Leaders Call for More Participation and Better Protection

As the Petro Administration is completing two-and-a-half years of the four-year presidential term (August 2022 to August 2026), conditions for human rights activists and social leaders have hardly improved, especially in several regions and localities where illegal armed groups continue to operate. Generally, human rights defenders lack guarantees and free and participatory spaces[3] to publicly advocate for human rights. Additionally, in most cases, they don't have the support of the authorities to carry out their work. In a country like Colombia defending human rights is a high-risk activity. In the course of their work, defenders face attacks and threats that not only endanger their lives, freedom, and physical integrity but also aim to silence the voices of those who speak up for collective rights.



[3] See report:
"Esperanza bajo riesgo:
La falta de un espacio
seguro para defender
derechos humanos en
Colombia continúa"
from Amnesty
International
<https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2023/11/colombia-defenders-remain-at-risk/>

According to the organization Somos Defensores, from March 2022 to March 2024, 1,732 attacks on social leaders and human rights defenders were reported in Colombia, 426 of which were murders.

The numbers continue to rise. INDEPAZ, an independent human rights group, recently reported 173 social leaders murdered in all of 2024, [4] not including the 31 ex-combatants who demobilized with 2016 peace agreement who were also killed in 2024. As of January 2025, INDEPAZ had already reported the murder of three human rights defenders in the new year. Particularly troubling is that over 90% of the victims had previously approached the Office of the Attorney General, the Ombudsperson's Office, and local police authorities to file complaints and request protective measures. According to Indepaz, the assassination of 173 social leaders in 2024 means that the number have held steady in recent years – in 2023: 188; 2022: 187; and 2021, 165. According to Franklin Castañeda, director for human rights at the Ministry of Interior, "These results are intolerable." The principal forum for coordination between the human rights groups and local leaders from all over Colombia is the National Roundtable on Guarantees (Mesa Nacional de Garantías), originally established in 2009.

Despite the current administration in Colombia coming to power with the backing of many human rights defenders and social leaders who were unhappy with previous administrations' historic neglect of their concerns, the situation on the ground has not changed much. In light of the ongoing crimes they face, in December 2023 the Constitutional Court, in Judgment SU-546, declared the situation faced by social leaders and human rights defenders constitutes an "unconstitutional state of affairs."

[4] Available in:
<https://indepaz.org.co/indices-sociales-defensores-de-dd-hh-y-firmantes-de-acuerdo-asesinados-en-2024/>



It ordered that the National Roundtable on Guarantees must meet at least quarterly. In the first such meeting this year, on January 16, a broad coalition of human rights groups, related organizations, and local and regional social leaders[5] expressed their concerns and frustrations at the continuing critical situation. They set out five main points with a view to securing commitments from the government to mitigate the situation:

1. Rejecting the persistence of attacks on human rights defenders, social leaders, and ex-combatants of the FARC (the guerilla organization that signed a major peace agreement in 2016), and noting that Somos Defensores documented 6,820 attacks and 1,270 homicides from 2016 to 2024;

2. Expressing concern about the lack of effective action to address the structural factors fostering such attacks, “such as the persistence and expansion of paramilitarism, the very limited reforms of the armed forces and National Police, impunity, the lack of reforms of the intelligence and counter-intelligence functions of state security agencies, and the lack of stable guarantees for engaging in social protest.”

3. Supporting the attainment and consolidation of peace as a priority of the current administration yet calling for these peace efforts to include tangible measures to protect the lives of social leaders and ex-combatants. They call for greater transparency, participation, accountability, attention to community demands, and public deliberations in the various negotiations.

4. Denouncing that “impunity continues to be a critical factor perpetuating attacks on defenders and signers of the Peace Accord.”

[5] Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos, Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo, and Alianza de Organizaciones Sociales y Afines, Programa Somos Defensores and local and regional spokespersons of the “guarantees” process.

5. Denouncing that “institutional resistance to carrying out judicial orders related to reforming the intelligence agencies continues to be a serious problem.” “The lack of investigative results on the continuity, institutional location, and persons responsible for operating Pegasus spyware, and the failure to identify those persons who have been or continue to be victims of such meddling is a serious threat to our democracy and our public freedoms.”

The broad coalition concluded its statement with several proposals, a key theme of which is the need to include civil society participation in the design and implementation of public policies to address these problems. One of the recommendations to the National Protection Unit (UNP), which provides protective services to human rights defenders, union leaders, and journalists, is to ensure participation in efforts to bolster collective protection: “To date, we have not been convened to the forums where this issue is being discussed, which is unacceptable in a process that claims to be transparent and inclusive.”

In the wake of the meeting of the National Roundtable on Guarantees, representatives of Colombia’s human rights organizations held their first meeting with President Petro since he took office. The January 21 meeting included the participation of Interior Minister Juan Fernando Cristo, High Commissioner for Peace Otty Patiño, and the Presidential Adviser for Human Rights Lourdes Castro. At the meeting the groups presented six requests: (1) persist in the effort to seek a negotiated solution to the armed conflict; (2) bolster the presence of the government institutions in the Catatumbo region; (3) achieve a national agreement on adopting peace as a policy of the Colombian State; (4) establish a joint mechanism for monitoring and verifying the policy of Total Peace, together with civil society and the international community; (5) prioritize and strengthen the national process of guarantees for human rights work; and (6) guarantee the framing, continuity, and sustainability of public policies to strengthen the work of defending human rights.

Overcoming this crisis requires profound reforms, adequate resource allocation, and a firm commitment to addressing impunity and ensuring effective protection for those who fight for fundamental rights in Colombia.



ACTIONS to support peace and justice in Colombia:

Links for urgent actions to support human rights in Colombia:

We highlight here just two urgent actions issued by Amnesty International in January 2025. The first is to support the Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS), based in Barrancabermeja (Santander), in the Magdalena Medio, and other civil society groups and communities in the same region.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/8924/2025/en/> to ask the Colombian government to address ongoing threats, in particular to the president of CREDHOS, Iván Madero, but also (Urgent Action Jan. 20, 2025, Protect defenders from armed groups.)

The second urgent action alert, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/8941/2025/en/>, is to ask the Colombian government to protect the civilian population of the Catatumbo region from the escalating violence. (Urgent action Jan. 22, 2025, Protect civilians in Catatumbo.)

For more information:

*Website of the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos, which brings together hundreds of organizations, national, regional and local, working for human rights: <https://coeuropa.org.co/>

*Website by a network of over 100 civil society organizations, La Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo (PCDHDD), expressing the needs of human rights organizations: <https://ddhhcolombia.org.co/>

* PCDHDD Press Releases: <https://ddhhcolombia.org.co/prensa/>

* Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, May 7, 2024, Eighth report on Colombian Peace Agreement implementation, full Spanish report: https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/Siete_a_os_de_implementaci_n_del_Acuerdo_Final_perspectivas_para_fortalecer_la_construcci_n_de_paz_a_mitad_de_camino/25651275?file=46146288

*Kroc Institute, Eighth report on Peace agreement, short English Executive summary: https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/Seven_Years_of_Final_Accord_Implementation_Perspectives_to_Strengthen_Peacebuilding_at_the_Halfway_Point/25651407?file=46221582

*Nov. 12, 2024: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-path-forward-for-colombias-2016-peace-agreement-and-lasting-security/>

*Jan. 20, 2025 <https://ddhhcolombia.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/170125-Pronunciamiento-Mesa-Nacional-de-Garantias-FINAL.pdf>

* Land Reforms: This article in El Espectador is an example of progress on Land Reforms, by the ANT, Agencia Nacional de Tierras. El Espectador, Jan. 21, 2025. <https://www.elespectador.com/especiales/la-agencia-nacional-de-tierras-llega-por-primera-vez-al-paramo-de-sumapaz/>