

COLOMBIA IN CONTEXT

Colombia in Context is a new 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 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 May 2025 report, we highlight recent events affecting peace and justice in Colombia and provide context.

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(1) U.S.-Colombian relations -

(a) Impact of U.S. Tariffs and cuts to USAID on Colombia's Peace Process

In one of his first acts as President, Trump allowed Elon Musk's DOGE team to dismantle the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), forcing its staff to abandon all their work around the world, including programs supporting civil society leaders and programs advancing peace in Colombia. As support for USAID was halted, attacks on civil society leaders have increased, with more assassinations of Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, environmental and human rights leaders, and continued displacements of civilians in various regions.

The impact was described in the May 5 New York Times article, *How Trump's Ending of USAID Threatens a Nation's Fragile Peace*, by Jorge Valencia. What follows is a summary of that article, including excerpts.

Since 2001 USAID spent US\$3.9 billion in Colombia, the most of any country in South America. While the U.S. Defense and State Departments sent weapons to fight coca farming, USAID invested in economic development projects. After the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord with FARC guerillas, U.S. funds supported crop substitution projects to move farmers to alternatives to coca, while State Department funds supported counternarcotics efforts, and removal of land mines planted in 60 years of war.

The impact of withdrawn U.S. funds is evident in military and police setbacks that favor criminal groups. The impact on Colombia's civilians is dire. USAID brought stability to rural regions still in control of illegal armed groups. "There are parts of the country where there's the bad guys and then there's USAID," said one former contractor, who was working with a nonprofit that suspended its work trying to prevent young people from joining armed groups, after its U.S. financing was stopped.

USAID funded services for the 2.8 million displaced Venezuelans who live in Colombia. Colombia is the largest destination for Venezuelans fleeing their country's political and economic crisis. The JEP or Special Peace Courts set up to try war crimes and crimes against humanity during the civil war, received 10% of its funding from USAID and the State Department. The U.S. provided technical and logistical support, including forensic tools to identify bodies found in mass graves. The President of the JEP, Judge Alejandro Ramelli, said loss of U.S. support will slow down the courts' work, which the Peace Accords promised would bring justice to tens of thousands of victims and defendants by the 15-year deadline for the JEP in 2031.

A key feature of the 2016 Peace Accords was land reform: returning lands stolen by illegal armed groups to peasants. USAID funded Colombia's National Land Agency (ANT: Agencia Nacional de Tierras) so they could conduct land surveys, identify land used for illegal crops, and issue legal titles to families who agreed to stop farming coca in exchange for formal land ownership. The National Land Agency does not have the budget to continue this work on its own, so the loss of USAID puts these efforts on hold.

So who will benefit from the loss of USAID? The only winners are the armed groups, said León Valencia, director of the Bogotá-based Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, an organization that works on post-conflict issues and had received U.S. funds. "They can tell demobilized guerrillas or victims that the government signed a peace agreement and didn't keep its promise."

(b) Case Study of USAID Cuts: Interview with Luz Marina Becerra, legal representative of the Coordinación de Mujeres Afrocolombianas Desplazadas (La Comadre), May 2025

In May 2025 the Colombia Human Rights Committee asked Luz Marina Becerra to describe the impact of the sudden cutoff of assistance from USAID on her organization, La Comadre. Following is her response:

“We had projects through IOM [International Organization for Migration] as an operator of USAID. In 2013 they supported us to design a strategy for psychosocial healing, recognizing the gaps in Colombia when it comes to addressing the mental health problems, since the vast majority of those problems have been brought about by the armed conflict, especially in the territories.

“Working with the Ministry of Health and the Victims Unit’s Program of Psychosocial Care and Comprehensive Health for Victims of the Armed Conflict [PAPSIVI in Spanish], we succeeded in including not only a gender perspective but also an ethnic perspective. We embraced this program, first, recognizing the disproportionate impacts of the armed conflict on Black women. Second, recognizing the gaps we have when it comes to designing and implementing public policies to address all the traumas and sequelae of the armed conflict. And third, because the PAPSIVI strategy designed by the state lacked a differential approach tailored to the particular characteristics of our communities.

“Comadre played a particularly key role before the Integrated System of Truth, Justice, and Reparation and Non-Repetition [the transitional justice institutions created in the 2016 Peace Agreement]. We provided four reports to the Truth Commission, two to the Special Peace Courts (JEP), and two to the Unit to Search for Persons Considered Disappeared. These reports were supported by the IOM, which enabled us to play a role in the transitional justice system....

“This year we had signed an agreement for collective reparation, one of the initiatives we have been leading. We have engaged in this process for the last 10 years; with this new project we were working to promote various inter-institutional roundtables in several local communities around collective reparation, holding cultural festivals engaging the receiving or host communities, where the displaced persons arrive; in those communities people often think [the displaced persons] are coming to take away opportunities from them, invading their territory. Our initiative is an attempt to achieve lasting solutions, which the United Nations has been proposing around the world – the obligation of states to provide lasting solutions for displaced persons. And we were continuing to promote the strategy of psycho-spiritual healing. But unfortunately with the new policy of the U.S. government and the cuts of USAID resources, we lost support for that project.

“This has had a significant negative impact on the organization: we had been making gains, yet today, this geopolitical crisis has led us to review our own situation, internally, to look at our strengths, so as to reconfigure our work and continue going forward with our struggles.

“Another significant impact is the reduction in personnel. With the support of IOM we were able to have technical staff to support the various thematic and strategic lines of work of La Comadre, yet with the cutbacks we had to suspend staff, and today just a few of us who are continuing to wage the struggle are bearing all the work....

“We had a national level team with seven persons, and we had to let go of three, all professionals. Today four remain, not with the same level of education needed for these processes, nor with the same political clarity and level of knowledge as is needed for raising the profile of these struggles. We had 10 projects in different communities, and one coordinator for each one, but this staff we had to suspend due to lack of resources. This affects our operations both nationally and in the regions where we work.

“There are also emotional impacts, due to the expectations and hopes we had of continuing to go forward with our work. We had decided that this year would be the year of La Comadre because we planned to set in motion a three-year plan. Yet implementing it is difficult since we don’t have the personnel or the money for publicizing or implementing it. This also interrupts life projects, both individual and collective.

“Today, seeking funding is more complex and competitive. We intended to seek resources from the European Union, but we found that they are also rethinking their presence [in Colombia] and weighing who they are going to continue funding.”



(2) Defending the Defenders:

(a) Visit by Hernán Arciniegas, delegate of Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos, to the United States

From April 6 to 11, Hernán Arciniegas, the human rights point person for the largest trade union federation of Colombia, the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) for Valle del Cauca, visited Washington, DC and New Jersey, hosted, respectively, by the Colombia Human Rights Committee (DC) and Colombia Grassroots Support (NJ).

The visit began in Washington, with an orientation meeting. In Washington Hernán held meetings with staffers from the congressional offices of Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA), Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR), and Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA). Issues discussed on Capitol Hill included the ongoing critical situation for human rights defenders in Colombia, especially in the departments of El Chocó, Cauca, and Nariño. Also discussed was the uncertain picture of continued U.S. aid to Colombia. The offices also requested specific information on how the cuts in funding from USAID to Colombia are impacting the organizations and communities that received such aid.

In Washington Hernán also met with the State Department and Amnesty International and participated in a reception at the Colombia Embassy for the first two Colombian-Americans ever elected to the U.S. Senate, Sen. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) and Sen. Bernie Moreno (R-OH).

Hernán also gave talks at George Washington University, in Washington, and at Rutgers University, in New Jersey.

(b) Somos Defensores Report “Unprotected” (“Sin Protección”) documents 727 attacks on human rights defenders in Colombia in 2024

In the course of 2024, Programa Somos Defensores (We are Defenders Program) verified 727 individual attacks directed against 655 human rights defenders in 28 departments plus Bogotá. Compared to 2023, this represents a slight decrease of 5% (with 38 fewer cases).

The departments with the largest number of attacks were: Cauca (27% of the total), Antioquia (11%), Valle del Cauca and Norte de Santander (with 9% and 7% respectively). Despite the significant decrease in Nariño, southwestern Colombia continues to be the region hardest hit.

The document also describes the geography of 404 threats, 157 assassinations, 62 detentions, 44 forced displacements, and 24 kidnappings, among other attacks aimed at human rights defenders last year. Indigenous community leaders continued to suffer the most attacks (with 195 incidents), followed by members of local community councils known as Juntas de Acción Comunal, which accounted for the largest number of assassinations, and saw a significant increase in Valle del Cauca and Cesar (675% and 800% respectively). Compared to last year, kidnappings were up 200% nationwide; most of the kidnappings are attributed to the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) armed group.

Of great concern is the situation in El Chocó, where assassinations increased six-fold due to the acts attributed primarily to urban gangs; and the increase of assassinations in Arauca to 17.

In the 2024 report, PSD notes that, in terms of the perpetrators of these attacks, 37% are unknown, followed by paramilitary groups (22%), and post-Peace Accord groups (i.e., the ELN and the various FARC dissident groups), with 160 attacks, an increase of 18%. The fragmentation of the illegal armed groups in 2024 expanded the scenarios of risk that human rights defenders face, resulting in increased early warnings issued by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson, stemming from confrontations among armed groups. Despite the risk, these warnings went unheeded.

Female human rights defenders in 2024 faced 195 attacks: 133 threats, 19 assassinations (in 2 of which the victims were targeted because of being women), 16 forced displacements, 11 assassination attempts, seven kidnapping, two arbitrary detentions, two acts of sexual violence, and one case of torture. LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders faced 17 attacks, accounting for 2% of the victims targeted nationwide. Of the selective acts of violence against them, 29% were assassinations, evidencing a higher level of lethal violence compared to violence targeting persons with other gender identities.

The 2024 report also warns that the last two-and-a-half years have seen an increase in the number of imminent risks, despite gains in some policies intended to protect defenders, such as the Policy to Dismantle Criminal Organizations, the Comprehensive Public Policy of Guarantees, the Comprehensive Program of Guarantees for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders, and the implementation of Decree 660 of 2018, for framing comprehensive protection measures. Decreases in the most common forms of violence (threats, assassinations, and assassination attempts) were no greater than 10%.

While there was a slight decline of 11% in the number of assassinations (with 11 fewer cases than in 2023), a trend continues that has been observed since 2022, in which assassinations continue to account for more than 20% of all attacks against human rights defenders. In this context, the advantages of the dialogues that are part of the Paz Total policy are unclear and vary from region to region. While in the department of Nariño they may have contributed to a reduction in the attacks against defenders, in Chocó the assassinations increased 600% due to acts attributed mainly to urban gangs operating in Quibdó, even though several of these groups held dialogues with the government in 2024.

These urban gangs, motivated mainly by economic gain, deploy violence that is more selective yet more lethal. Also alarming is the increase in assassinations in Arauca, with 17 victims. The ELN was responsible in 10 cases; the social leaders most impacted were members of the Juntas de Acción Comunal, with 11 victims. The ELN also appears to be responsible for more of the kidnappings. Kidnappings doubled in 2024 compared to 2023; the ELN is responsible for most such incidents.

(3) Status of Colombia's Peace Processes

Paz Total Peace Strategy shows first success: one group in Nariño takes concrete steps towards peace in April 2025

Accomplishments

Since the first issue of Colombia in Context (February 2025) the Total Peace policy of the Colombian government has seen some gains but has also been subject to criticisms due to the lack of further gains. In what has been called “the most important step in implementing the total peace” policy, on April 5, nine months after the formal initiation of talks, agreements have been reached for the demobilization of Comuneros del Sur, a guerrilla group based in the department of Nariño that split from the National Liberation Army (ELN). Comuneros del Sur turned over 585 weapons and explosives, which were destroyed by the Colombian Army in April, while the rest of the materiel is to be turned over by July 5. The negotiating delegations agreed future actions will follow a road map along three main topics: de-escalation of violence; implementation of transformations agreed to in the region where the group operates; and the transition of the members to civilian life (El Espectador April 5, 2025).

Negotiations began with a dissident group of the former FARC guerrillas known as the Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes (EMBF). (El Espectador April 11, 2025). However, on April 27, the same group assumed responsibility for killing seven soldiers and taking five prisoners. Defense Minister Pedro Sánchez rejected this action, characterizing it as a “betrayal of the transformation of the territory towards peace.” While a ceasefire was not in place, the government had suspended offensive operations against the group for one month. President Petro ordered that an independent commission examine the circumstances so as to take action.

After the violence that erupted in Catatumbo (Santander del Norte) in January of 2025, the Colombian Army confirmed on April 29 the results of operations carried out in the municipality of Ocaña to guarantee the security of the civilian population. Two members of the Frente Camilo Torres Restrepo (of the ELN) were arrested, and two killed. The Army also confirmed the seizure of weapons, munitions, grenades, cell phones, and vehicles. The commander of the 30th Army Brigade reported that Operación Catatumbo has resulted in the arrest of members of the two guerrilla groups behind the violence, including 34 members of the ELN and 22 members of the Frente 33, a FARC dissident group.

Evaluation and criticisms

In an editorial on April 27, 2025, El Espectador stated, “The implementation of the Peace Agreement [of 2016] is in intensive care, yet it is surviving. With Santos, his term ended before he could implement it; with Duque almost every aspect was brought to a standstill; and Petro has diluted the responsibilities. At the end of the day, none of the three administrations has been capable of designing a formula that works for carrying out a binding mandate.”

“Without leadership, institutional coordination, or a clear voice to defend it, the agreement, which at one time promised to transform Colombia – and one of the banners taken up by the president to reach the presidency – appears to be relegated to the sidelines by the same administration that promised to implement it.” (El Espectador, April 27, 2025).

Vera Grabe, the government’s lead negotiator with the ELN, commented in the aftermath of the violence in Catatumbo, “The ELN was not able to read the moment or the administration with which it was negotiating.” In a statement the government delegation added, “The arrogance of the ELN trying to legitimate the action in Catatumbo has nothing to do with peace.”

The deputy director of the think tank Fundación Paz y Reconciliación said that the president's response was not clear: "There's a general climate of confusion because we no longer know exactly what the government is going to do.... We don't know if we are at peace, if we are at war, if there will be a ceasefire or not, and all that gives rise to confusion, which is the prevailing emotional state, even for the armed groups."

According to an editorial in the Colombia +20 section of El Espectador, the president "turned over the responsibility to three institutions, and none has followed through. The peace commissioner is focused on the Paz Total negotiations; the minister of interior is prioritizing his political agenda; and the Unit for Implementation [of the 2016 Peace Agreement] has not succeeded in having much impact or articulating its role." (El Espectador, April 27, 2025)

As summarized by WOLA, the Washington Office on Latin America, "Demobilizing illegal armed groups financed by illicit economies (including drugs), expanding state presence into ungoverned areas, and strengthening local institutions and markets would bolster security, benefiting both the region and U.S. interests in Colombia." (WOLA Perspectives, April 29, 2025)

In the latest developments (as of late May), the government and the FARC dissident group known as Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano, under the command of Walter Mendoza, were to begin a new round of negotiations – the fifth under the Paz Total strategy – in Tumaco. (El Espectador, May 23, 2025) And President Gustavo Petro, who travelled to Rome for the official installation of Pope Leo XIV, has proposed that the Vatican could host the dialogues with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), suggesting Petro has not given up on the pursuit of negotiations with this group. (El Espectador, May 19, 2025).

(b) New Movimiento Social por la Paz

In response to the frustrated state of the peace process, over 150 national civil society groups and four international organizations supporting peace and human rights in Colombia issued a statement on April 3 asking the government for specific steps towards peace, including: To coordinate all humanitarian and peace initiatives at the local, regional, and national levels, to thus develop a policy approach to peace that is based on civil society's role as the nation's primary constituency, and with a judicial framework based on the right to peace; to resume peace talks with all the main armed groups, including dissident guerrilla groups, and paramilitary groups; to evaluate processes by which groups give up their weapons; and to implement the proposed steps towards peace detailed in the 2016 Peace Accords with the FARC guerillas. Following up on the appeal, over 200 groups met in Bogotá on April 5 and then on April 30 to further the new initiative. As a result of the April 5th meeting, the Movimiento por la Paz was created as a civilian platform to articulate and promote concrete actions against war and violence, in both rural and urban areas. This new movement will sponsor multiple events in the next few months in various parts of Colombia to develop strategies for peace; the conclusions will be shared at the second Congress for Peace, expected to meet in September 2025. (El Espectador, April 10, 2025).



ACTIONS to support peace and justice in Colombia:

Recent press releases by the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos on serious human rights situations in different regions of Colombia:

Arauca: Assassination attempt on social leader Ernesto Roa

The Coordinación Colombia – Europa – Estados Unidos, a national platform for defending human rights, categorically rejects the recent acts of violence against social leaders in Colombia, particularly the attack perpetrated by paid hitmen against peasant and social leader Ernesto Roa in Saravena (Arauca) on April 22. Ernesto Roa is a recognized social and peasant leader who belongs to the Asociación Nacional Campesina “José Antonio Galán Zorro,” affiliated with the Northeast Node of the Coordinación and at the same time a spokesperson of the Movimiento Político de Masas Social y Popular del Centro Oriente de Colombia, an active board member of the Fundación Joel Sierra, and a delegate to the Community Water, Sewerage, and Sanitation Company of Saravena. The social and human rights organizations in Arauca have been targeted by constant attacks since 2022, including accusations against their leaders and social base; stigmatization by local and national authorities and media outlets; and several attacks in which several of their leaders have been assassinated. This is happening as these groups have repeatedly denounced the acts of violence and human rights violations in Arauca due to the armed conflict and acts of collusion by the armed forces and dissident groups of the former FARC. Investigations into the criminal groups behind such attacks have not been effective; rather, the systematic attacks on social leaders have met with impunity. The Coordinación calls on the Government, the Office of the Inspector General (Procuraduría), and the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson (Defensoría del Pueblo) to take action to guarantee the security of social leaders, human rights defenders, and their organizations, in addition to pursuing investigations to determine the direct perpetrators and those who are behind these attacks on the social movement in Arauca.

<https://coeuropa.org.co/el-atentado-contra-el-lider-social-ernesto-roa-profundiza-el-nivel-de-riesgo-contra-el-movimiento-social-en-arauca/>

Caribbean: Ongoing threats to human rights leaders

The Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos, together with two other broad platforms for human rights in Colombia (Plataforma Colombia de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo and Alianza de Organizaciones Social y Afines) plus the Somos Defensores program have denounced the ongoing critical situation facing human rights defenders in the Caribbean region of Colombia. In particular, they denounced the assassination of Walberto Quintero Medina on April 28 in the city of Valledupar. Mr. Quintero, a leader in the department of Cesar of the CUT trade union federation and the food workers' union Sinaltrainal, was assassinated by paid hitmen passing in a vehicle.

The groups also express concern at the stigmatization and harassment of José Humberto Torres, labelled an "enemy of the people" by the illegal armed group Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada (ACSN). The threat comes after Mr. Torres publicly denounced the crimes committed by the ACSN against local communities. José Humberto Torres, in his decades of work with the Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, visited the United States on several occasions on behalf of the Coordinación. More recently he has served as chief of staff to the governor of Magdalena, and in the National Land Agency, also in Magdalena.

The groups add, concerning the Caribbean: "We are also alarmed by the recent serious attacks on the Kankuamo indigenous people, in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, by members of the sister Arhuaco people, a situation that illustrates the fragility of the institutional mechanisms for resolving intercultural conflicts and the lack of an effective policy for protecting indigenous territorial rights."

The communication concludes noting that the Caribbean region of Colombia, historically neglected, requires a greater institutional presence of the state that goes beyond a military presence and includes citizen participation as a crucial element.

<https://coeuropa.org.co/la-situacion-del-caribe-colombiano-no-da-espera/>

Norte de Santander: Threats and persecution of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights:

The Northeast Node of the Coordinación has reported ongoing and stepped up threats directed against the members of the Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CPDH), Norte de Santander chapter. Actions against the CPDH have continued since 2019, and most recently have included being approached and harassed by persons who identify themselves as police and who take photographs of the group's offices.

<https://coeuropa.org.co/la-coordinacion-colombia-europa-estados-unidos-nodo-nororient-rechaza-las-amenazas-hostigamientos-persecucion-y-la-desproteccion-que-esta-sufriendo-el-comite-permanente-por-la-defensa-de-los-derech/>

To support the individuals, communities, and groups mentioned in these urgent action alerts, you may write the Office of the Attorney General (Fiscalía), urging appropriate criminal investigations and prosecutions; the Office of the Inspector General (Procuraduría), which has oversight authority with respect to all public servants especially as regards upholding human rights standards and bringing disciplinary charges; and the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson (Defensoría del Pueblo), in charge of promoting policies that respect human rights and issuing early alerts to imminent or ongoing human rights crises.

Fiscalía: Luz Adriana Camargo, Attorney General of Colombia, email: despacho.fiscal@fiscalia.gov.co

Procuraduría: Gregorio Eljach, Inspector General of Colombia, email: quejas@procurduria.gov.co

Defensoría: Linda Cabrera, National Director Complaints, email: licabrera@defensoria.gov.co

For more information:

WOLA, April 29, 2025, Colombian Dissident ELN Guerrillas Agree to Disarm, Although Total Peace Remains Elusive

<https://www.wola.org/analysis/colombian-eln-disarm-total-peace-remains-elusive/>

<https://periodico.unal.edu.co/opinion/la-paz-territorial-vino-para-quedarse>

NYT, May 5, 2025: How Trump's Ending of USAID Threatens a Nation's Fragile Peace

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/world/americas/colombia-U.S.A.I.D.-peace.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Somos Defensores 2024 Report: <https://somosdefensores.org/informe-anual-2024-sin-proteccion/>

El Espectador, April 10, 2025 on Congress for Peace that created the new Movimiento por la Paz:

<https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memoria/petro-y-paz-total-crean-movimiento-por-la-paz-con-11-peticiones-al-gobierno-entre-ellas-reactivar-mesa-con-eln/>

Coordinación Colombia-Europa Estados Unidos, Report on how Colombian courts have blocked social reforms proposed by the Petro Administration:

<https://coeuropa.org.co/el-bloqueo-de-las-reformas-ante-las-cortes-y-la-politizacion-del-poder-judicial-2/>