

Colombia: Independent UN body finds systemic racism against people of African descent

BOGOTA/GENEVA – Following an eleven-day visit to Bogotá, Quibdó, Cartagena and Cali, the International Independent Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement has concluded that structural, systemic and historical racism persist in Colombia. Despite official acknowledgement by the State, this racism continues to generate violence, exclusion and a deep mistrust of institutions amongst communities of African descent.

The Expert Mechanism recognized several good practices, for instance, the reformulation of the guidelines on the use of police force in the context of the management of social protests. These guidelines prioritize dialogue over confrontation, which resulted in reduction of police use of force over the past years. Other measures include the training of many law enforcement officials on how to integrate human rights in their daily work, and the creation of the Ministry of Equality and Equity as well as the observatory on racism within it.

Still, the Expert Mechanism found that racism in Colombia is not a series of isolated incidents, but an entrenched system that produces and perpetuates inequalities. “It is often unconscious, but it is normalized, naturalized and rendered invisible,” said Víctor Rodríguez, an expert member of the Mechanism.

The most alarming findings focus on the interaction of people of African descent, particularly young people, with law enforcement and the justice system. The Expert Mechanism found:

Racial Profiling and Lethal Police Violence: Numerous and consistent testimonies of racial profiling point to a widespread practice. Black youth are disproportionately stopped and searched based solely on racial stereotypes. These encounters frequently escalate into excessive and deadly use of force, which often go unpunished.

Inhumane Conditions of Detention: The visit to the Bellavista Temporary Detention Centre in Cartagena revealed a serious situation. Severe overcrowding was reported, accompanied by a lack of sunlight, food, ventilation, water and medical care, with people locked up for months and even years in facilities intended for short-term holding. “The conditions I witnessed are inhumane and degrading. I have never seen worse conditions in my life. They strip away all dignity,” Rodríguez said.

Police fines as a tool for social and labour exclusion: The Mechanism identified the use of police fines or other corrective measures as a mechanism of social control and economic exclusion, specifically targeting young people of African descent. “These fines restrict access to future employment opportunities, pushing young people into informal

economy or into association with illegal groups, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and criminalization,” Rodriguez said.

State neglect and violence by non-State armed groups: In regions such as the Pacific coast, the absence of the State creates a vacuum that is filled by non-State armed groups and criminal organizations. Exploiting exclusion and grievances, these groups forcibly recruit children and young people, while Afro-descendant communities continue to be subjected to killings, enforced disappearances, displacement, sexual violence and movement restrictions with little or no institutional response.

The Expert Mechanism welcomed Colombia’s acknowledgement of structural racism and their efforts to address it and called on Colombia to step up its efforts to ensure measures taken result in concrete improvements in the lives of people of African descent. Its preliminary recommendations include: undertaking structural reform of the National Police, including its transfer to a civilian ministry; ensuring accountability for cases of racial discrimination and police violence; and urgently addressing the humanitarian crisis in transitional detention centres.

The Mechanism thanked the Government for its invitation and for the smooth cooperation in organizing the visit. It further thanked all institutions and stakeholders who met with the Mechanism and provided valuable information.

The Mechanism shared its preliminary observations and recommendations with the Colombian Government earlier today. The full findings of its visit will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council at its 63rd session in September/October 2026.

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Background: The [International Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement](#) was established in July 2021 by the Human Rights Council to make recommendations, inter alia, on the concrete steps needed to ensure access to justice, accountability and redress for excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officials against Africans and people of African descent. [Tracie Keese \(United States of America\)](#) and [Victor Rodriguez \(Costa Rica\)](#) were appointed by the President of the UN Human Rights Council to serve as its independent experts.

For media requests and queries, please contact: In Bogotá: Ms. Diana Losada diana.losadacastano@un.org; In Geneva: Todd Pitman, Media Adviser for the UN Human Rights Council’s Investigative Missions, todd.pitman@un.org / +41 76 691 1761; or Pascal Sim, Human Rights Council Media Officer, simp@un.org / +41 79 477 4411. For other issues related to the visit, please contact the secretariat at +41 79 444 4828 during the visit or write to ohchr-emler@un.org.

