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Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to show discontent over possible austerity measures in November and December. The committee representing the protesters has handed President Duque a list of 13 demands. Among them are that the government fully meet its obligations under the terms of the peace agreement and that it does more to prevent the killings of social activists and former FARC-EP members. The protests were mainly peaceful. Eighteen-year-old Dilan Cruz was shot dead by a police officer during a protest in Bogotá.

Violence from the ongoing internal armed conflict and disputes over territorial control following the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement raged on. The main victims continued to be Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant and *campesino* (peasant farmer) communities and human rights defenders. Concerns remained about impunity for crimes committed during the armed conflict and threats against and killings of human rights defenders. Violence against women, particularly sexual violence, persisted.

The absence of state authorities and their neglect of territories controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) left a power vacuum in areas historically disputed by various armed groups for their natural resources or strategic locations. This, exacerbated the structural problems of inequality, exclusion and extreme poverty affecting the majority *campesino* population, Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, with a gender-differentiated impact. In this context, killings of human rights activists and defenders reached historic levels in 2019.

Background

In March, President Duque objected six of the 159 articles of the Statutory Law of the Special Justice for Peace (JEP). In May, the Constitutional Court dismissed the objection and the law had to be signed by the President.

In September, more than 500 social organizations and NGOs presented a report, after President Duque's first year in office. They stated that the State was imposing a different agenda of rural reform, crop substitution and victim assistance to the one set out in the Peace Agreement and was reducing financing for the Agreement. They also highlighted the government's failure to support laws to implement provisions of the Agreement, its legislative proposals that ran contrary to the Agreement and its undermining of the "Truth, Justice and Reparation and Non-repetition System".

On 5 October, the Supreme Court of Justice formally linked former president Álvaro Uribe to a criminal investigation for procedural fraud and bribery. Days later, Álvaro Uribe unjustly accused the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee (Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos; FCSPP) of “paying to manipulate witnesses” against him.

In October, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the government signed an agreement to renew the Office’s mandate in the country.

Claudia Lopez has become the first woman and gay person to be elected mayor of Bogotá in October’s elections.

In November the Minister of Defence was forced to renounce after the Congress interrogated him about the death of children in a bombing of a dissident FARC-EP camp. President Ivan Duque had assured that the attack was the result of "strategic, meticulous and impeccable" work by the Armed Forces, whose members he defined as "heroes" of his country for their performance against a "gang of narco-terrorists". The Minister was also accused of knowingly killing the children and then hiding the information.

Internal armed conflict

In January, the International Committee of the Red Cross stated that there are were at least five non-international armed conflicts in Colombia: four involving the Colombian government against the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Gaitanist Self-Defence of Colombia (AGC) and elements of the former Bloque Oriental (Eastern Bloc) of the FARC-EP that did not accept the peace process. There fifth non-international armed conflict involved the ELN and the EPL and centred on the Catatumbo region.

On 17 January, a car bomb at the General Santander School in Bogotá left 23 people dead and more than 80 injured. After the ELN claimed responsibility for the bombing, President Duque immediately declared an end to the peace negotiations with the guerrilla group, which had begun in February 2017.

In August, the Army bombed what it claimed to be a guerrilla camp in which their leader, Rogelio Bolívar Córdoba, aka Gildardo Cucho, and 13 of his followers were killed, according to official information. At the end of the year it was established that there were children in the place who died in the attack. According to forensic examinations presented in Congress, the deceased included a 12-year-old girl, a 15-year-old teenager and a 16-year-old girl. Other information point that there could be sixteen the children who died in the attack. This revelation and the fact that the government had concealed it ended up with the resignation of Defense Minister Guillermo Botero in November.

Clashes between the different armed groups continued and were the main cause of displacement and forced confinement. Between January and July, more than 32,000 people were forcibly displaced and more than 350,000 were affected by severe restrictions on movement and access to basic services. The impact was felt principally by Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

Of particular concern were clashes between the armed forces; the ELN; groups arising from former paramilitary groups, such as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, the Black Eagles and the Gulf Clan; and new armed groups such as FARC-EP dissidents in regions including Chocó, Norte de Santander, Antioquia and Nariño. The disputes between the ELN and the EPL in Norte de Santander intensified and led to increased fighting with the army in a region already suffering from social exclusion and accumulated history of violence.

Norte de Santander was one of the most affected regions. During the first six months of 2019 alone, 309 civilians in the region were impacted by the conflict, almost double the total number registered in 2018. Of these 309, 62% were intentional killings and 13% were enforced disappearances and other serious crimes. In 85% of these cases, no one had been brought to justice by the end of the year.

On December 31st, 300 members of the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia placed four communities of Bojayá, Chocó, under forced confinement and threatened human rights defender Leyner Palacios, who has been vocal about the presence of these illegal armed groups in their territories.

Recycling of old tactics

In mid-2019, the *New York Times* claimed to have information that the government had pressured the Colombian Army to intensify military attacks to increase the number of so-called “criminals and guerrillas” killed. The leak of the possible reintroduction of such a shoot-to-kill strategy, which had reached a peak during the 2000s with the so-called “false positives” (civilian killings by state agents falsely presented as combat casualties), sparked outrage in the country, particularly as some communities had already highlighted the return of such a policy of extrajudicial executions in previous months.

One of these cases was that of the former militiaman Dimar Torres, who was killed by the Army in Convención, Norte de Santander, as he was about to cross a checkpoint. Although army personnel denied any knowledge of his whereabouts at the time of his disappearance, neighbours found his body shortly afterwards in a hole where he had been thrown in an attempt to cover up the killing. Although the army accepted responsibility a week later, they initially justified the killing by claiming that Dimar Torres had threatened a soldier with a firearm during a fight. Criminal proceedings against those charged in the case were continuing at the end of the year.

In addition, there was condemnation of the confrontational strategy adopted with of increased militarization in regions where armed groups were present. This, combined with a plan to restart the use of aerial fumigation with glyphosate to eradicate coca

bushes, was in clear defiance of Constitutional Court rulings and Peace Agreement provisions on the substitution of illicit crops, which include the signing of collective agreements with families who express their intention to replace coca with another crop.

New phase of armed conflict

At the end of August, several members of the FARC-EP, including its leaders Iván Márquez, Jesús Santrich and “El Paisa”, released a video on social media announcing that they were arming to begin a “new stage of struggle...in response to the state's betrayal of the Havana peace accords.”

Prior to the broadcast of this video, the whereabouts of Iván Márquez and “El Paisa” had been unknown since August 2018 and those of Jesús Santrich since June 2019. Jesús Santrich had been released in May after serving a year in prison and after the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) refused a request for his extradition from the USA for alleged drug-trafficking activities. Both, Iván Márquez and Jesús Santrich were among the 8 men and 2 women FARC political party representatives automatically elected to Congress.

The number of FARC-EP dissidents is unclear but official reports agree it is growing.

Peace Agreement

According to the Kroc Institute, by February 2019, only 23% of the measures required by the Peace Agreement between the government and the FARC-EP had been fully implemented.

As of September 2019, the Office of the High Commissioner for the Peace had identified 13,202 people as guerrilla members, 12,978 of whom had begun a process of reintegration. A total of 3,038 were living in Territorial Spaces of Capacitation and Reintegration (ETCR). The UN reported there was a larger group of former guerrilla members (9,138 people) who preferred urban reintegration, principally because it offered greater employment opportunities. However, a significant number of people was also leaving the ETCRs because they were not benefiting from productive projects and were being neglected and driven into poverty.

Furthermore, as of June 2019, the FARC political party stated that more than 130 former guerrilla members had died and 11 had disappeared.

The Technical Secretariat of the International Verification Component of the Peace Agreement noted worrying delays and serious setbacks as a result of the passing of laws and decrees that were contrary to the provisions of the Agreement.

The Technical Secretariat also considered the government's reticence in implementing the chapter in the Agreement on land reform to be especially problematic. The problem of land tenure and distribution were factors leading to armed conflict in Colombia and, therefore, land reform was key to creating a sustainable peace and guaranteeing protection for rural communities at risk.

The “Truth, Justice and Reparation and Non-repetition System” created by the Agreement was where the greatest progress was identified, despite a reduction in its budget of approximately 30% by 2020 (from US\$90 billion to US\$67 billion) and multiple attacks on its legitimacy. The judicial element of this system, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), was the institution most often targeted for criticism by President Iván Duque, his party and some media. One of the obstacles hampering the functioning of the JEP were objections to the institution’s statutory law presented by the President; these were eventually dismissed by the Constitutional Court in May. Some victims also expressed concerns that the process was not victim centred and failed to ensure the security of witnesses.

The Attorney General’s Office started criminal proceedings against JEP officials on the grounds that they had engaged in disseminating falsehoods and procedural fraud. The Accusation Committee of the House of Representatives opened a preliminary investigation against the President of the JEP and a magistrate who had been singled out by a member of the President’s political party, Democratic Centre, and accused of corruption and conflict of interest. The investigation was continuing at the end of the year.

The JEP initiated two cases during the year relating to the victimization of members of the Patriotic Union and the recruitment and use of children in the armed conflict. Five major cases opened by the JEP in previous years related to illegal detention by the FARC-EP; the human rights situation in Nariño municipalities; killings by state agents falsely presented as combat casualties (“false positives”); the humanitarian situation in Urabá municipalities; and the territorial situation in municipalities of Norte del Cauca.

In December 2019, the Forensic institute found a mass grave in the city of Dabeiba, in between Medellín and the Caribbean Coast, with approximately 50 bodies of people that might have had been extrajudicially executed. The JEP is conducting an investigation on the case. According to the Forensic Institute, there are currently 200.00 unidentified bodies of disappeared people from 2005 and 2007, victims of the army in “false positives” operations.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders, in particular those defending rights linked to land, territory and the environment, continued to be the targets of a large number of attacks and threats because of their work. The risks they faced were directly related to the structural causes of the armed conflict, such as disputes over land and natural resources. Many defenders were involved in claiming collective rights related to the recognition and protection of the territory of Indigenous Peoples, and Afro-descendants and *campesino* communities. These territories were often disputed between armed groups for economic interest and social control.

In October, 15 people, including five indigenous leaders, were murdered in Cauca in five days. The Indigenous National Organization of Colombia (ONIC) declared that one indigenous person is killed every three days in the country.

The situation of human rights defenders and communities that continued to resist the armed conflict was aggravated by the new dynamics that followed the signing of the Peace Agreement whereby new armed groups disputed control over areas previously held by the FARC-EP. In some cases, FARC-EP dissidents clashed with other armed groups over territory that had historically been under their control. The minimal presence of state authorities in a many rural parts of the country left communities without effective protection. Social leaders reported a rise in threats against them and the Ombudsman's Office documented that, between the signature of the Peace Agreement in 2016 and June 2019, 482 defenders had been killed. The NGO Somos Defensores registered 591 attacks on defenders (29% women and 71% men) between January and June 2019, comprising 59 killings and 477 death threats. A UN report recorded 86 HRD killed in the year. Impunity for those attacks continue to be the norm. The lack of comprehensive and effective protection for human rights defenders was evident in 2019. In reaction to this, state authorities created an action plan to coordinate the crisis response of state institutions on issues related to protecting human rights defenders and preventing killings, until a proper public policy is in place. At the end of the year, the Ministry of the Interior stated that a series of workshops had been initiated to create a comprehensive policy for the protection of human rights defenders.

However, other existing measures, including those created by the Peace Agreement, aimed at eradicating the root causes of the dangers facing human rights defenders, were weakened. For example, the Security Guarantees Commission, a Peace Agreement mechanism to dismantle illegal armed groups in Colombia, held only two formal meetings throughout 2019.

Institutions in charge of protecting human rights defenders, such as the National Protection Unit, continued to implement reactive and individual measures crucial to the protection of some human rights defenders in cities, but which were largely inappropriate in the context of rural communities. Apart from four pilot projects reported by the Ministry of the Interior, collective measures for the protection of communities and their leaders were rare.

Women defenders faced particular risks. Although most attacks continued to target men, attacks on women defenders rose. Of the 59 defenders killed between January and June 2019, 10 (17%) were women; the equivalent figure for 2018 was three women killed.

According to a report by Oxfam, several factors increased the dangers faced by women defenders. Many were either Afro-descendant or Indigenous women living in highly marginalized areas. As a result, they were impacted disproportionately by violence, not only against them individually, but also against their communities. The increasingly complex process for reporting attacks also had the effect of deterring reporting and increasing impunity for attackers.

Venezuelans seeking international protection

The crisis in Venezuela in recent years continued to have an impact on countries in the region and particularly on Colombia, which was host to the largest number of people fleeing Venezuela. Many of those arriving in Colombia had travelled through irregular gang-controlled land routes and were in a poor state of health. Victims of forced recruitment, trafficking in women and exploitation of children continued to be reported.

At the end of June, the official number of Venezuelans residing in Colombia was 1.4 million. Bogotá, Norte de Santander, La Guajira, Atlántico and Antioquia were home to more than 60% of this population.

According to official figures, as of October, Colombia had granted almost 600,000 Special Stay Permits, which authorize people who fulfil specific requirements to stay in the country for a period of two years. Border Mobility Cards were also granted to allow people to access border areas for up to seven days to purchase basic goods and services before returning to Venezuela. According to media reports, between February and September, the number of Venezuelans with a Border Mobility Card rose from 2,908,336 to 4,315,000, an increase of 70.04% in just six months.

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