

Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: Rupert Colville

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1) Colombia

We are alarmed by the strikingly high number of human rights defenders being killed, harassed and threatened in Colombia, and by the fact that this terrible trend seems to be worsening. We call on the authorities to make a significant effort to confront the pattern of harassment and attacks aimed at civil society representatives and to take all necessary measures to tackle the endemic impunity around such cases.

In just the first four months of this year, a total of 51 alleged killings of human rights defenders and activists have been reported by civil society actors and State institutions, as well as the national human rights institution. The UN Human Rights Office in Colombia is closely following up on these allegations. This staggering number continues a negative trend that intensified during 2018, when our staff documented the killings of 115 human rights defenders.

The violations are occurring against a backdrop of stigmatization of rights defenders, especially those living in rural areas. These regions are characterised by a lack of adequate basic social services, high levels of poverty, the existence of illegal crops, the presence of unlawful armed groups and criminal groups. There is an urgent need to address disparities in the enjoyment of all rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights and especially in rural areas.

A wide range of activists have been targeted. They include community leaders, Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, environmentalists, peasants, journalists, LGBTI, and women's rights defenders, some involved in local politics. Community leaders are particularly vulnerable and account for more than 70 percent of all recorded killings. Some of them were apparently targeted because they have been supporting the implementation of certain aspects of the Colombian peace agreement, including land restitution, victims' rights and the illicit crop substitution programme.

The most recent attack happened on 4 May, when 20 Afro-Colombian human rights defenders – including the well-known, award-winning environmentalist and women's rights defender, Francia Márquez – were attacked with grenades and firearms near Santander del Quilichao, in the department of Cauca. Fortunately, no one was killed, although two security officers provided by the National Protection Unit for the protection

of the group, were injured. In January alone, three assaults against women leaders that defend victims' rights were recorded. In the case of human rights defender and land claimant, Maritza Quiroz Leiva, the attack was fatal.

In March, widespread demonstrations, locally known as "Minga", were held in the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Putumayo and Huila. Indigenous people, Afro-Colombians and peasants held mass protests to complain about longstanding grievances related to land rights, delays in implementing the peace accord, and the continued violence endured by civil society activists. Following the demonstrations, pamphlets containing death threats against prominent indigenous leaders and human rights defenders were distributed.

We are worried that, with the approach of local elections in October, the number of violent attacks may increase even further.

We acknowledge the steps taken so far by the State to improve the protection of human rights defenders. We take note of the creation of specialized judges, as recently announced by President Duque.

Nevertheless, we call on the authorities to redouble their efforts to expand and strengthen efforts to safeguard a free and secure environment for civic engagement.

Despite some positive actions by the Office of the Attorney-General, we urge the State to make sure all killings, attacks and threats are properly investigated and the perpetrators – including those directing them, as well as those carrying them out – are brought to justice.