

Colombia: Northern Cauca Indigenous killings

Earlier this week, we signed a Host Country Agreement with Colombia, which will allow us to remain and operate in the country with our full mandate – including technical cooperation and human rights monitoring and reporting – for a further three years. Over the last 22 years, our Office in Colombia has worked very closely with the Government and various actors, including civil society, on the protection and promotion of human rights, as well as in supporting implementation of the Peace Agreement signed between the Government and the FARC.

One key focus of our Office in Colombia has been on the rights – individual and collective – of indigenous peoples, including their rights to self-determination and to land. Indigenous human rights defenders in particular have long been harassed and subjected to violent attacks for their advocacy.

On Tuesday 29 October, five indigenous people from the Nasa community were shot dead and six others were severely injured by gunfire while trying to prevent criminal groups from entering their territory. Among them was Cristina Bautista, a Nasa traditional authority (or ‘Neehwesx’). She was also a former UN Human Rights Office indigenous fellow in 2017 and the recipient of a 2019 grant from the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples. She was an inspirational woman deeply dedicated to defending the human rights of indigenous peoples in Colombia.

The massacre took place in Tacueyó in Northern Cauca, in the southwest of the country – a region that has increasingly been plagued by violence, mainly perpetrated by criminal groups against indigenous peoples who try to prevent them from entering and operating in their ancestral territories.

So far this year, our Office in Colombia has documented 52 killings in the Nasa territory in Northern Cauca region. Of these 52 individuals, 11 were human rights defenders. In addition, members of the Nasa community have received 74 death threats and nine have been physically attacked. In total, our office in Colombia has received reports of 106 killings of human rights defenders so far in 2019.

The Nasa community has repeatedly raised the alarm with the authorities about threats to their safety. Despite efforts by successive Colombian Governments, indigenous peoples continue to face great risks, especially religious or community leaders like Cristina Bautista.

The UN Human Rights Office stresses once again the urgent need for effective protection and preventive measures for indigenous peoples across the country, and particularly in

the Northern Cauca region, in line with their right to land and their right to self-determination, as recognized by the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We call on the authorities to establish a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the 29 October killings in Northern Cauca, including into possible failures on the part of the authorities that may have allowed the massacre to happen. We also urge the authorities to break the cycle of impunity relating to threats, harassment and killings targeting indigenous peoples. We urge the Government to respond to this dramatic situation in a comprehensive and consultative manner, and not simply through increased military presence.

We remind the Government that any preventive and protection measures taken which affect indigenous peoples should be agreed with their own authorities, in full accordance with their traditions and customary practices, autonomy and jurisdiction.

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