



¡May gambling on for peace not cost us our lives!

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Photo: Student mobilization for the freedom of Mateo Gutiérrez, Colombia reports

Summary

The armed conflict that Colombia suffered for more than 50 years not only affects the population where military operations take place. The National Security Office's discourse promotes an idea of the "enemy within" and any hint of disagreement with the ruling government is interpreted as an act of insurrection.

Such stigma has had serious consequences on the physical and psychological well-being of hundreds of students and their families. Death threats, imprisonment and abuses of power by the military and police forces are constantly happening at Colombian universities. Under the current government there has been no substantial change. The constant attacks of the executive power against social movements, especially inside universities, are still a source of concern. We will now summarize the human rights situation during 2016 from

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the perspective of different social sectors, particularly the Colombian student movement.

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General situation of human rights in 2016

We take this opportunity to denounce the arbitrary arrest of Mateo Gutiérrez Leon, a sociology student at the National University of Columbia, which took place February 24, 2017. The accusations made against him by the National Attorney's General Office and the Defense Ministry — meant to label him as a bomber who carried out terrorist acts in the city of Bogota — are yet another charade. The same happened in the cases of professor Miguel Ángel Beltrán, the four students of Antioquia University, and the four students from Surcolombiana University, just to mention the most recent cases. We extend our solidarity to Mateo and his relatives, and we convey our willingness to fight for his immediate release. We call upon all social organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean to declare their solidarity in the face of such painful events and to demand the Colombian Government face the current circumstances facing the country at this time. Peace will never be achieved by criminalizing critical thinking.

The year was marked by important breakthroughs in the peace talks between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia

(FARC-EP), which culminated with the signing of the agreement last August. 2015 ended with the best news for the country: the signing of Point 5, “the Agreement on Conflict Victims”, which was the end result of a difficult negotiation between the parties, with the direct involvement of countless victims (including important sectors of Colombian society, such as students who were also victims of the armed conflict). The signing of this agreement opens the possibility to construct a new scenario for the country in which the different positions of all social actors could be respected. Likewise, the parties agreed to a follow-up and a supervision mechanism for the bilateral ceasefire. Furthermore, not only has an approach being adopted for the agreements that focuses more on gender equality (July); but also the signing of the Bilateral and Definitive Ceasefire (August), and the beginning of the Peace Talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in April.

Unfortunately, the joy of the agreement between the National Government and the FARC-EP was eclipsed by the results of the referendum on October 2. By using wording that did not correspond to reality — but that nevertheless resonated with an important part of the country — the most backward sectors made sure that the “NO” vote won by a tiny margin of 0.47% against those of us who, from different corners of the political arena, would have chosen to work for peace with social justice. According to the insinuations by the “NO” campaign's manager Juan Carlos Vélez Uribe, the main

Poster "Students are not terrorists" ACEU Cauca





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points of the political debate were not questioning the agreements reached in Havana. Instead, they sought to use lies to win the popular vote.¹ If we add up the inability of other social actors to explain the benefits of the agreements and the political resolution of the conflict, the end result was that the collective imagination preferred lies over the real elements contained in the agreements.

Beyond that, paramilitary organizations are regrouping in the country. They changed their names (BRACIM, GAO) without having really changing the objectives they pursue, the actors who participate in them, and the practices they use.

During 2016, the government was petitioned hundreds

¹ http://www.larepublica.co/el-no-ha-sido-la-campa%C3%B1a-m%C3%A1s-barata-y-m%C3%A1s-efectiva-de-la-historia_427891

of times to take action against the growing violence that affects unions, human rights defenders, and social and political organizations. Many have expressed their concerns through organizations such as the Human Rights High Commissioner of the United Nations, the European Union, the Human Rights Inter American Court (CIDH), the United Nations (UN), and a group of 37 US Congressional representatives, chaired by democrat Jim McGovern, as well as other social and political national organizations. Unfortunately, the agencies in charge have not yet provided an effective answer.

According to data by the NGO *Somos Defensores*, during the first 6 months of the year, 279 human rights defenders have suffered some type of aggression (threats, arbitrary arrests and lawsuits, information thefts or homicide attempts), and 35 were actually murdered.

The culprits are the paramilitary (68%), the Public Forces (10%), unknown actors (22%), and FARC-EP (0.1%). (NGO *Somos Defensores*, 2016, p. 46 and 56). Furthermore, there has been a systematic assassination of the members of *Marcha Patriótica*, including 23 murders in 2016, that add up to 129 ever since the organization was first created. (Caracol Radio, 2017, p. 3). The crimes took place in 19 of the 32 Colombian provinces.

Let us also consider the inhumane conditions in which prisoners are kept in our country, especially those associated with political or social crimes. There is a constant brutality exerted against them by the guards of the National Penitentiary Institute (INPEC), as well as a medical negligence that has caused the death of several inmates. The food they are supplied is in appalling condition. For instance, spokespeople for the political prisoners from Columna Domingo Biohó, yard 4 of the Picota, presented a claim that they have “found objects in the soup or rice like needles, cigarette butts, and pieces of plastics, fibers and glass...” (FARC-EP, 2017, p. 2).

The human rights situation at Colombian universities in 2016

Having presented a general context of the human rights situation in the country, we now share some figures relating to human rights violations in which the victims have been university students.

We start by acknowledging that acts targeting the Colombian student movement have diminished. However, the severity of the violence by the public forces and criminal organizations still poses a huge threat.

The first event in 2016 took place in Soacha (Cundinamarca) on March 6, when an armed man shot social communication student Klaus Zapata after a soccer match. Klaus was a member of the Colombian Association of University Students (ACEU) and was doing research on the mining sector. He was also investigating the “t ierreros” phenomenon (paramilitary groups that

illegally occupy lands to allow people who have fled the armed conflict to live there in exchange for a monthly fee, which is a kind of extortion). He was also looking into small-scale trafficking cases.

The second event took place in the city of Santa Marta against ACEU’s President, Omar Gómez, a sociology student at the National University of Columbia. On March 23, while conducting meetings with social leaders of the area, he was subjected to an anti-terrorist raid by the National Police. First, the leaders’ security staff were stripped of their weapons and IDs, and then they were all detained and kept for an hour.

Thirdly, students from Antioquia University (Cristian Camilo Peña, Alexis Casas, Santiago Ángel and Juan Camilo Ángel), also ACEU’s members, were illegally captured after a march on Labor Day by Antioquia’s Sectional Office for Criminal Investigation (SIJIN). After taking their bags, they were accused of terrorism and spreading FARC-EP propaganda. They spent a month in the dungeons of said institution. They were finally released and the charges against them were dropped due to a lack of evidence.

While this case ended with the liberation of those students, the four students from Surcolombiana University were not so lucky. Roger Murcia Escobar, William Cruz Javela, Édison Fabián González Sierra and Óscar Eduardo Gasca Garzón — all members of the University Students Federation (FEU) — were sentenced to 20 years in jail for criminal activities like producing and selling explosives, and for possession of weapons restricted by the army. But the prosecutor did not present any conclusive evidence of their guilt.

Conclusions

Even though we celebrate the end of the armed conflict between the Colombian government and FARC-EP, and the start of a dialogue between the national government and ELN, we feel extremely concerned that paramilitary organizations are still on the loose, attacking social

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organizations and human rights defenders. No movement towards consolidating peace and reconciliation will be possible if people who disagree with the ruling local, regional, or national governments are threatened. Respecting political opposition is essential in a system of checks and balances, and for the rule of law to exist — even more so in our case, where the desire to end the armed conflict has resulted in millions of victims. We do not accept that building peace should continue costing us our lives.

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