

WOLA Statement

May 8, 2019

U.S. and Colombian Authorities Must Respond Strongly to Brazen Attack on Afro-Colombian Human Rights Groups

On Saturday May 4, unknown armed men opened fire and tossed a grenade at a group of prominent Afro-Colombian leaders in the town of Santander de Quilichao, in the southwestern department of Cauca. The attack is emblematic of the deteriorating security situation faced by human rights leaders in ethnic communities, as well as the Colombian government's inability to provide them with basic measures of protection and justice.

Several of the organizations that came under attack—including the Black Communities Process (*Proceso de Comunidades Negras*, PCN), the Association of Afro-Colombian Community Councils (ACONC, by its Spanish initials), and the Association of Afro-descendant Women of Northern Cauca (ASOM, by its Spanish initials)—have played a prominent role in aspects of Colombia's historic 2016 peace accord, as well as other national movements to safeguard ancestral land rights and to protest violence.

Others present at the meeting include human rights activists and longtime WOLA partners Carlos Rosero, Francia Marquez, Clemencia Carabali, Victor Hugo Mina, and Sofia Garzon, and 20 other people, including international accompaniers and two children. Two bodyguards from Colombia's National Protection Unit (*Unidad Nacional de Protección*, UNP) who bravely responded to the attack were injured.

On May 6, several leaders who'd attended the meeting, received a menacing text death threat, alerting them that "what happened on Saturday was only the beginning of the extermination of all".

Since the signing of the 2016 peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Colombian government has stalled in implementing key aspects of the accord, leading to continued violence in former major conflict zones like Cauca department. Those engaged in defending human rights and peacebuilding in these areas continue to face threats and assassinations, with indigenous and Afro-descendant communities particularly affected.

Since the signing of the peace accord, over 430 social leaders have been assassinated in Colombia, with 106 killed in Cauca alone, according to local human rights groups. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) [has counted](#) at least 47 social leaders or members of vulnerable ethnic communities so far this year. Many incidents have been concentrated in former hubs of the conflict, including Cauca and Chocó department.

Notably, the Afro-Colombian rights organizations who came under attack formed part of a coalition, the Ethnic Commission, that helped ensure the historic inclusion of an Ethnic Chapter in the 2016 peace deal. This Chapter safeguards the rights of ethnic minorities in

implementing peace throughout Colombia, while recognizing the disproportionate impact of Colombia 53-year conflict on indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

These organizations also formed the backbone of the 2014 Black Women's March, whereby Afro-Colombian women, led by Francia Marquez, walked from Cauca to Bogotá to urge the Colombian government to guarantee their rights to their ancestral lands and to protect the community from violence and illegal mining that is devastating people and the environment. This ongoing peaceful resistance has also been documented in a [PBS documentary series](#), released in 2011.

As the most prominent public face of this collective struggle, Francia Marquez was awarded Colombia's national human rights award in 2015 and the [Goldman Environmental Prize](#) in 2018. Behind her are thousands of Afro-Colombians who suffer violence, displacement, and abuse at the hands of the illegal armed groups and business interests.

For years, WOLA has joined in its partners in urging Colombian and U.S. authorities to act on the deteriorating crisis of security facing social leaders and human rights defenders, a crisis that disproportionately affects Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities.

However, as the violence continues—and as this latest brazen attack illustrates—there has been no real effort on the part of the Colombian government to act on this. While there may have been some institutional rearrangements, public events, and the occasional tweet, little has actually been done on the ground to stop more killings from taking place.

The Colombian government's overall lack of concern regarding the interests of and the threats to ethnic minorities was previously made evident in the aggressive reaction of authorities towards a national protest movement known as [the "minga."](#) Indeed, since the Duque administration has taken office, there has been a significant rollback in supporting the rights of ethnic minorities and providing them with adequate protection.

What happens next?

In order to stop these killings, the Duque administration must take a multipronged approach to the security crisis.

The first step is to boldly advance and implement the peace accord, as was finalized in 2016, prioritizing the Ethnic Chapter. The peace accord contains mechanisms to guarantee the dismantlement of illegal armed groups and the effective implementation of specific collective protection measures for ethnic minorities, as designed by these very communities.

Second: investigations into the attacks and killings of social leaders must result in the intellectual and material conspirators sanctioned and put in jail. Too often, Colombia gets away with saying that its critical human rights situations is "under investigation." Then, once the international pressure wears off, there are no more advances in the case and perpetrators are off the hook.

The U.S. government has a responsibility to guarantee that all of the above takes place due to U.S. legislation that includes human rights conditions tied to U.S. military assistance. It is

critical that the U.S. government ask Colombia why the perpetrators of Saturday's attack were able to pass through security forces checkpoints without a problem.

Furthermore, the U.S. Congress should immediately pass Representative Hank Johnson (D-GA) [House Resolution 713](#) to request Congress's support of the [United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent](#). This will assist with addressing racism and other structural issues that underlie the security crisis facing Afro-Colombians.