



Dear all,

We remain concerned about the safety, security, and protection of social leaders and rural, Afro Descendant, and Indigenous civilian communities in Colombia. The best way to improve protection is for the international community to advance the consolidation of the 2016 peace accord, in particular, the Ethnic Chapter and the Commission for Security Guarantees; support the peace dialogue with the National Liberation Army (ELN) with whom the Colombian government has a temporary bilateral ceasefire and to support efforts that lead to the dismantlement of illegal criminal groups. For ethnic communities, the Colombian government must step up its support to the indigenous and cimarrona guards so they can better deter and protect communities within the collective ethnic territories.

At the same time, Colombian authorities (President's office, Attorney General, Inspector General, Human Rights Ombudsman, Minister of Defense, and Minister of the Interior) must all be encouraged to do their utmost to bring the intellectual and direct perpetrators of violence against social leaders and communities to justice. The National Protection Unit requires reforms so corruption within this entity is rooted out, its process for determining and granting measures is more efficient and integrates a differentiated ethnic, gender, and rural approach, and the individual measures are more in line with the needs of the recipients (in consultation with them) and efforts to provide collective measures are implemented.

U.S. policymakers and the diplomatic corps should advance political protection of at-risk individuals and communities by publicly denouncing abuses committed against defenders and communities and urging protection and justice in those cases. OAS and UN mechanisms designated to protect journalists should activate in response to threats, intimidation, and spurious legal proceedings of journalists and demand that such hostilities cease.

In particular, we ask for U.S. and other authorities to act when it comes to two WOLA partners whose security situation is critical:



### ***La Nueva Prensa***

Gonzalo Guillén, investigative journalist, and Roberto Mauricio Rodríguez, lawyer, for the Colombian media outlet *La Nueva Prensa* have suffered death threats and judicial harassment in 2023. They've become targets of harassment due to investigations published in *La Nueva Prensa* and for expressing themselves on social media platforms. The harassment comes from the Prosecutors, Judges, and Magistrates of the Courts and Tribunals of Bogota and Barranquilla and subjects named in the investigation. In 2023 alone they've received up to 12 judicial actions, which can result in double or triple appeals in the further and/or contempt that can lead to possible imprisonment. *La Nueva Prensa* has filed over 15 complaints with the Colombian Attorney General's Office and the Supreme Court of Justice. Such complaints, involving illegal armed criminal groups such as the Gulf Clan, public figures, and active prosecutors, are generally and systematically not investigated and/or are subject to archival proceedings.

### ***Veteranos por Colombia***

Alexander Chala Saenz, is the Political Chief of the Corporation of retired military veterans for Colombia is an anti-corruption activist who advocates for justice for victims of abuses committed by the armed forces of Colombia, transitional justice, labor rights of current and retired members of the armed forces. Since 2021, he's publicly exposed public officials who are allegedly corrupt and/or linked to criminal and drug trafficking groups. He denounced Generals and Colonels on active duty and retired. As a result, he's received numerous death threats including highly public ones. He's been monitored, and he and his family photographed and attacked on social networks. According to Saenz: "senior officers have ordered members of intelligence units within the national army to monitor me and my family." Saenz is also at risk because he testified before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) in cases of extrajudicial executions whereby perpetrators were deprived of their liberty for involvement in the same.

Below are cases of human rights and security incidents WOLA received from July 31 to September 7, 2023.

### ***Violent Attacks and Harassment Against Union Leaders***

The National Union of Workers in the Sugarmill Industry (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria Azucarera*, SNTIA) [issued](#) a statement denouncing the recent violence, attacks, and threats against union leaders and the political director of the Association of Interdisciplinary Work in Palmira, Valle de Cauca back on June 14. Juliana Millan Guzman, the director, was with her family while approached by unidentified men who threatened to kill her. As the political director of the union, this adds to the harassment that the company and other unions face.



### ***Political Prisoner Killed (Valle de Cauca)***

The Jhonatan Sabogal Collective Process (*Proceso Colectivo “Jhonatan Sabogal”*) [published](#) a statement July 28 concerning the murder of a recently released political prisoner, Diego Escobar Barona. Barona was detained in the Palmira Prison and was released in December 2022, only to be murdered in February 2023. The collective adds his name to a list of those killed who only fought for what is socially just.

### ***Illegal Armed Groups and Land Restitution Institutions Violate Community (Antioquia)***

On July 28, the San José de Apartado Peace Community (*Comunidad de Paz San José de Apartadó, CPSJA*) [publicized](#) a series of incidents including threats perpetrated by illegal armed groups in the past few weeks within their community. The community faced multiple death threats, a heavy paramilitary presence, and threats against board directors of the peace council highlighting ongoing insecurity in the area. CPSJA questions the presence of the security forces in the area if they do not seem to guarantee any kind of independence, impartiality, or security given that many who meet with the army often receive death threats afterward. In addition, the Land Restitution Unit Urabá, has entered their territories without authorization or consent from the community.

### ***Respected Indigenous Leader Assassinated (Cauca)***

On July 26 The Association of North Cauca Indigenous Councils (*Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca, ACIN*) [reported](#) the assassination of former authority leader Freddy Bomba Campo in the Nasa Kiwe Thek Ksxa'w territory. Armed men entered his home and shot him in front of his children. The Institute for Peace and Development Studies (*Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, INDEPAZ*) [claims](#) he was killed by three men despite being assigned a security scheme from the National Protection Unit.

### ***Political Candidate and Union Promoter Killed (Santander)***

On August 2, INDEPAZ [reported](#) that recognized political leader Jorge Saúl, a candidate for the council of Carmen de Chucurí for the Creemos party of Federico Gutiérrez and spokesman for unions in the area was killed. He was attacked with a firearm on July 28 and died due to the gravity of his injuries later. INDEPAZ claims that illegal armed actors who target social leaders are a force of social control and a violation of the population's rights.



### ***Indigenous Wounaan Member Kidnapped (Valle de Cauca)***

On August 2, the Regional Council of the Self-Government Wounaan Authority (*Consejería Regional de Gobierno Propio del Pueblo Wounaan, KOWONDEV*) [reported](#) that in the lower San Juan River, hooded men searched with a photograph for community leader Alexis Choco Chamapuro. They reject human rights abuses against the Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities along the river. While the Council celebrates the government's temporary ceasefire with the ELN, they call on the National Government, the Peace Commissioner, the Ombudsman, international actors, and the Buenaventura district mayor to review in depth what occurred, and warn of the potential, worsening security crisis across Buenaventura due to increased illegal armed group confrontations.

The Authority Council of the Wounaan Nation Colombia (*Consejo de Autoridades de la Nación Wounaan de Colombia, WOUNDEKO*) [sent](#) an urgent alert on August 3 to the National government and the armed groups operating between the district of Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca department, and the town of Palestina, in San Juan, Chocó department to immediately hand over Wounaan Indigenous leader Alexis Choco. Choco was kidnapped on August 2 in Palestina by heavily armed, hooded men who fled by boat to San Juan- an ELN operational area. The authority demanded for his immediate release and rejected this human rights violation on the day the National Committee for Peace Participation as part of the ongoing ELN peace dialogue was installed.

### ***Men Kidnapped Day Before Ceasefire (Chocó)***

On August 3, the San Juan General Community Council (*Consejo Comunitario del San Juan, ACADESAN*) [published](#) a statement urging the necessity of a multilateral ceasefire in the region, as ethnocide continues in Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities. The day prior, illegal armed men forcibly took Afro-Colombian leader Geiler Lizalda and Indigenous leader Alexis Choco. ACADESAN calls on armed actors to free them. They urge all armed actors to end the civilian suffering that the armed conflict generates. Such a situation is leading to forced disappearances, antipersonnel mining, death threats, restriction of civilians' freedom of movement, recruitment of minors, kidnappings, and murders in the San Juan River. ACADESAN waits for a response from all State entities, particularly from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of the Environment who systematically refused to respond, as well as humanitarian relief from the National Government.

***Woman Murdered During Funeral Ceremony (Chocó)***

On August 6, *NotiRio Sucio* [reported](#) that Marta Palacios was killed in Quibdó by two individuals on a motorcycle during a funeral ceremony for a community member who had died the day before. Authorities are investigating by reviewing security footage, and offer 15 million pesos to anyone who provides information about the perpetrators. The Chocó department is experiencing a wave of violence, with many violent incidents attributed to narco-trafficking organizations and armed groups.

***LGBTQIA+ Community Faces Violence (Antioquia and Tolima)***

*Caribe Afirmativo* [issued](#) several remarks on August 8, concerning the recent, violent attacks against members of the LGBTQ+ community in Medellín, Antioquia, and Chaparral, Tolima. In Medellín, a transgender woman from Venezuela was stabbed to death, and days later a gay man was stabbed to death in his home. Later in the week, a non-binary person was killed in Chaparral whose death is under investigation. The statement calls on local, departmental, and national authorities to take action in the face of this recent increase in violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community so that they can live in a dignified, safe manner.

***Paramilitary Group Intimidate Social Leaders (Capital District)***

According to a report from *Noticias Caracol* on August 8, social leaders in Ciudad Bolívar have [denounced](#) recent threats from those claiming to be members of the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*, AGC). Pamphlets and threatening videos have circulated the town, although notably, authorities affirm that there is no AGC presence in the city. Still, residents fear the growing insecurity, while leaders are designated as supposed military targets by the AGC. The messaging threatens to kill those who do not leave the town, citing the overflow of crime in recent months, and declaring war on criminals, narco-traffickers, and members of the Aragua Train (*Tren de Aragua*).

***Teachers Union Member Killed (Boyacá)***

INDEPAZ [reported](#) that on August 9, a primary school teacher part of the Boyacá Teachers and Education Workers Union (*Sindicato de Maestros y Trabajadores de la Educación Boyacá*, SINDIMAESTROS), José Armando Sanchez Avila, was killed in his home. Groups present in the municipality are both the ELN and other local structures. His death marks the 102nd social leader killed in 2023 and the 1,516th killed since the signing of the Peace Accords in 2016.



### ***Political Candidate Assassinated (Tolima)***

On August 9, INDEPAZ [reported](#) that a well-recognized political leader and candidate for the Honda Council for the Creemps party, Leandro Sánchez Reyes, was assassinated. The week prior, on August 2, another member of the same political party was murdered in Barrancabermeja. Sánchez Reyes was attacked in his home by two armed men riding a motorcycle. INDEPAZ noted that local groups present in the municipality circulate pamphlets and messaging on social media.

### ***Armed Group Attacks Ethnic Authorities and Causes Displacement (Cauca)***

On August 10, the Coordination of Community Councils and Organizations Based in Black Communities of the Pacific Coast Cauca (*Coordinación de Consejos Comunitarios y Organizaciones de Base del Pueblo Negro de la Costa Pacífica del Cauca*, COCOCAUCA) [reported](#) that an armed attack was committed in two homes where ethnic authorities and seven families reside, resulting in the displacement of 17 people including children women, and elderly individuals. The two houses were semi-destroyed by gunfire, and while fortunately, the people were unharmed, they were subjected to emotional and psychological damage. This attack in the Pla Community Council Territory, occurred while the council was in the process of restitution of territorial rights, which armed actors and organizations must respect.

### ***Three Killed in Massacre (Nariño)***

INDEPAZ [reported](#) that on August 11, three people, two not of Colombian nationality, were assassinated in the municipality of Tumaco, Nariño department. The three victims were 35-year-old Gaíndez Navia, 23-year-old Eduardo Marín, and 24-year-old Jeferson Aguilar. INDEPAZ identified several groups currently operating in the area, including FARC dissidents, the ELN, and other local characters.

### ***Multiple Homicides in Less than One Day (Cauca)***

On August 11 and 12, ACIN [reported](#) four homicides and one serious injury that occurred in less than a day in the northern zones of the Cauca department. Two individuals were run over by a yellow bulldozer machinery stolen by an armed group from the area, resulting in one death. The following morning two bodies of men were found, executed, and thrown next to a sugar cane field. These two have yet to be identified by authorities. Later that afternoon, another individual was shot dead in the head, and ACIN notes there was a checkpoint enforced that morning by the Dagoberto Ramos Front paramilitary group.

***FARC Dissidents Asked to Resolve Conflict (Caquetá)***

The Municipal Association of Pato Colonists (*Asociación Municipal de Colonos del Pato*, AMCOP) [released](#) a statement on August 12 expressing their commitment to support the desire for Total Peace under President Petro and calls to all armed actors and the national government to specify dialogue tables that will lead to the consolidation peace and end of harm to the civilian population. AMCOP demands that the Central General Staff of the FARC and the Segunda Marquetalia FARC-EP, a FARC dissident, resolve their disagreements and end intimidation tactics and stigmatization against those in rural territories. For this AMCOP requests the presence of the High Commissioner for Peace, the Catholic Church, and the Office of Human Rights to mediate this dialogue.

***Former Community Action Board President Killed***

On August 13, INDEPAZ [reported](#) that José Rubiel Guetia, social leader and former president of the Community Action Board in Jardín, and member of the indigenous San Lorenzo Reserve, was killed in Caldono, Cauca department. Guetia was killed with a firearm in the area known as Cerro Alto in Caldono. The Indigenous Guard present in the zone, have found the alleged responsible. His death marks the 105th social leader killed in 2023, and the 1,519th social leader killed since the signature of the 2016 Peace Accords.

***Petro Declares Social, Economic, and Ecological Emergency (La Guajira)***

The Self Government of the Shipia Wayuu Reserve in the Middle and High Guajira (*Gobierno Propio Shipia Wayuu de la Media y la Atla Guajira*, GPSWMAG) [released](#) a statement on August 14, claiming that they fully support President Petro's Decree 1085 which declared an economic, social and ecological emergency in La Guajira department. The authority details the causal relationship between high rates of child mortality and hunger with the persistent drought in the department. This has led to 53 deaths of young girls and boys in 2023 so far. Both preventive and precautionary measures are required to not further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis. Lack of budget and coordination of government entities has contributed to the situation alongside the rising temperatures those in the territory have faced this year.

***National Registry of Civil Status Official Kidnapped (North Santander)***

The Electoral Observation Mission (*Misión de Observación Electoral*, MOE) [released](#) a communication on August 15 denouncing the kidnapping and demanding the release of Camila Suárez Galván, an official from the National Registry of Civil Status, in the North Santander department. MOE emphasized the importance of public officials in the development and organization of elections and their role in democracy. Therefore, they must be valued by all of society and guaranteed to safely perform their duties. MOE states that between October 2022 and July 2023, 21 acts of violence against political, social, and community leaders have been registered in the North Santander department.



### ***Peace Accord Signer Killed (Nariño)***

INDEPAZ [reported](#) on August 17 that José Manuel Rivas Medina, a union member, a signer of the peace agreement, and currently working on a security escort assigned by the National Protection Unit was murdered in Pasto, Nariño department.

### ***Musician and Social Leader Assassinated (Valle de Cauca)***

Prominent social leader, musician, and cultural assistant in the Mayor's Office in Francisco Pizarro, Nariño, Lisandro Vallecilla Riascos was [killed](#) on August 20 while in Cali celebrating the Petronio Alvarez Pacific Music Festival. INDEPAZ reported his death as the 109th leader killed in 2023 and the 1,523rd killed since the signing of the Accords. WOLA signed a [joint statement](#) condemning his assassination and called for the protection of cultural leaders in Colombia.

### ***Rural Social Leader Killed (Caquetá)***

On August 23, INDEPAZ [reported](#) that the president of the Victoria Campesino Reserve Zone Association (Zona de Reserva Campesina La Victoria, AZORVACI) Ferley Fernandez Rojas was killed with a firearm. Protection services from the National Protection Unit were requested this April. Now, 112 leaders in 2023 have been killed.

### ***Escalation of Armed Confrontations (Antioquia)***

The Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights (*La Corporacion Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*, CREDHOS) [published](#) an alert on August 24 regarding the humanitarian crisis threatening the lives of rural communities of Cimitarra River Valley, as well as serious violations of International Humanitarian Law. Community sources allege that three signers of the Peace Agreement are missing and one signer has been killed by members of the IV Front of the Central General Staff of the FARC-EP. [Caracol Radio](#) alleges those kidnapped were due to retaliation by dissidents. Increased confrontations between FARC dissidents, military forces, and the AGC resulted in the confinement and mining of the Tagual la Po Emberá indigenous reserve. It is urgent to end these confrontations as it is a violation of humanitarian law.

CREDHOS asks the High Commissioner for Peace, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Ombudsman to find those responsible for the murder of Marcos Fidel Jiménez Bohórquez, the signer of the Peace Accord. The statement asks all armed actors, including military forces to respect the humanitarian agreement of the Middle Magdalena which excludes the civilian population and their property from armed confrontation. They insist the international community continue its efforts to monitor the situation. INDEPAZ [claimed](#) Bohórquez's death marks the 110th social leader killed in 2023 alone and the 1,524th killed since the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord.





### ***Illegal Armed Group Threatens INDEPAZ***

On August 25, *El Espectador* [reported](#) that Central General Staff (*Estado Mayor Central*, EMC) FARC dissidents- made accusations against Leonardo González, the director of the Human Rights and Conflict Observatory of INDEPAZ, saying he was giving “false and wrong” information about the armed group. The dissident group claims González is inciting war, while his uncle, Camilo González Posso, is coordinating dialogues with the dissidents. The High Commissioner for Peace stated during a press conference there are still obstacles during these negotiations to start talks of a ceasefire.

### ***Social Leader Murdered (Nariño)***

According to INDEPAZ on August 24, a social leader and current representative of the Aquaculturists ASSociation in La Guayacana was [killed](#). Known groups that operate in the area are the ELN, Los Contadores, Ivan Rios 21 Front, and the Alfonso Cano Western Block of the Second Marquetalia.

### ***Social Leader Killed in Massacre (Antioquia)***

INDEPAZ [reported](#) on August 24 that recognized social leader, Luis Miguel Echavarría, was assassinated. Echavarría was the president of the Barequeros Association of the village of San Pablo in Cáceres, Antioquia, and was one of the four men identified in a massacre committed in Bajo Cauca, Antioquia. Illegal Armed groups continue to perpetuate violence against the civilian population for territorial and social control of the population.

### ***Humanitarian Crisis for Indigenous Awá Worsens (Nariño)***

The Indigenous Unit of the Awá People (*Unidad Indígena del Pueblo Awá*, UNIPA) [expressed](#) their extreme state of anxiety and mourning in recent days due to the dynamics of the armed conflict which is breaking the community fabric of several Indigenous Awá Reservations in their ancestral territory. Armed actors cause confinements, massive internal displacement, threats, and accusations. Hooded men murdered Anarceli Preciados Taicus of the Awá Hojal La Turbia reserve on August 25. Anarceli leaves behind two young children who are orphaned as their father was also murdered in 2021, and in 2020 two relatives were disappeared by armed actors from the territory. This shows an indiscriminate persecution against the victim’s family and the ineffectiveness of the State. UNIPA calls on the National, local, and departmental entities, alongside the Human Rights organization to urgently prioritize the needs of the Awá people in this humanitarian crisis.



### ***Multiple Killed in Massacre (Sucre)***

On August 25, INDEPAZ [reported](#) that The San Onofre Mayor's Office denounced the homicide of three people- two women and one man- with gunfire who were working on a farm in Sucre.

### ***Woman Social Leader Killed (Valle de Cauca)***

On August 26, INDEPAZ [reported](#) that well-known social leader Caludia Ordoñez was murdered. She stood for the protection of human rights and territory and is currently running as a candidate for the Council of Jamundí. The Mayor of Jamundí denounced the incident. She was killed after starting work at her premises in front of the Jamundí prison. Her husband was also greatly injured in this incident. The Jaime Martinez Front, the Dagoberto Ramos Front of the Western Block, the AGC, the ELN, and other local bands all have a presence in the area. She is the 114th social leader killed in 2023.

### ***UN Human Rights Office Condemns Murder (Cordoba)***

The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, led by Juliette de Rivero, [issued](#) a statement on August 27, denouncing the deplorable homicide of William Alvarez Domínguez. Domínguez was killed during the exercise of his duties as a public defender. The statement expresses their condolences to his friends and family.

### ***Ethnocide Against the Indigenous Awá People (Nariño)***

UNIPA [denounced](#) in a statement on September 2 the detainment, torture, stigmatization, and murder of Indigenous community member Carlos Pai Pai of the Awá El Gran Sábalo Indigenous Reservation. While in the jungle with his mother-in-law, who does not speak Spanish, and his wife, armed actors forcefully detained him as they could only express their pleas in their traditional language. After being tortured and taken away, gunshots were heard twenty minutes later. Armed actors viciously murdered him as if speaking in his traditional language was cause for being shot 16 times and completely dismembered. It is not only a loss of life, but also for the Awá cultural survival. This statement warns of the serious situation in which the Awá el Gran Sábalo Indigenous Reserve finds itself, which systematically puts Indigenous people at risk.



***Environmental Activist Murdered (Tolima)***

Ten civil society organizations and coalitions [issued](#) a joint statement on September 3 rejecting the murder of Johan Ferney Aguilar González, a petitioner for the guardianship that ordered the organization of a public hearing to know the titles of Miranda Gold Company. He was killed hours after death threats were reported during a public hearing with over 700 participants. They are also concerned that the mayor's office issued a decree that prohibited the right to mobilization, the right to free expression, and the participation of young people in public hearings. They feel that this attack is a threat to defenders of the territory and human rights and a warning to all those who oppose the interests of corporate powers. They demand from the National Mining Agency due protection and sanction of all mining activities until peace and protection are given. They call on all authorities to provide security to leaders committed to fighting against powerful economic interests.

For further information or assistance regarding the above please contact Kelsey Kotts, [kkotts@wola.org](mailto:kkotts@wola.org)

Sincerely,

Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli

Director for the Andes

September 15, 2023