

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Virtual Briefing
on
Colombia: Challenges for Peace and Human Rights**

**Wednesday, July 23, 2025 –2:00 p.m. ET
Zoom**

Statement of Marino Córdoba, Advisor to the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), Human Rights and Ethnic-Territorial Rights Attorney, Contractor for the Restitution of Dispossessed Lands Unit (URT) in Colombia.

I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for the opportunity to share my perspective on the human rights situation in Colombia: “Colombia: Challenges for Peace and Human Rights. I would like to recognize and appreciate Congressman Jim McGovern’s leadership on issues related to Colombia, human rights, and global justice.

The war in Colombia has generated a deep community rift by violating fundamental rights and causing constant fear in communities due to the assassinations of leaders, targeted killings, and the use of explosives in urban areas. These incidents, which are on the rise in the country, limit communities’ autonomy and their political organization; this constitutes a violation of human rights and infringes international humanitarian law.

The Colombian government’s efforts to seek peace is supported by the communities living in areas where the war is taking place. Although the results have not been as expected, we understand that we must continue to persist. The war is worse, and we are tired of its negative effects. The previous Colombian government, Mr. Iván Duque, did everything possible to debilitate the peace agreement, leaving Colombia’s security in a very fragile state. Today, persistent violence, criminal groups, and geopolitical instability continue to mark the country's future. Armed groups in Colombia have no ideologies; they are focused on doing business with drug trafficking and illegal gold mining in remote areas. To achieve this, they need to control regions and their populations.

In this context, pressure from the Colombian armed forces is not enough; different alternatives are needed so that communities are not forced to grow coca crops by armed groups. Since the signing of the peace agreement in 2016, we’ve learned that achieving peace is one thing; maintaining the peace is another. It requires persistence and political will, regardless of what economic sectors think. Peace in Colombia translates to peace in the region. Achieving peace in the region has will help to reduce waves of migration from Colombia to the United States.

Hence the importance of the work that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) did with public institutions and communities to end extreme global poverty and promote resilient, democratic societies that can realize their goals and full potential.

Colombia is one of the countries where (USAID), in its work with civil society, demonstrated important results. USAID supported the peace agreement and played a very important role in its implementation, especially in rural areas inhabited by poorer populations. It helped ensure that ethnic communities (Afro-Colombians and Indigenous) had a voice at the peace negotiating table and, ultimately, their ethnic leaders were able to negotiate with the negotiating parties the Ethnic Chapter of the final agreement.

This Ethnic Chapter focuses on ensuring the effective participation of ethnic communities in the implementation of the peace agreement, the protection of their territories, their culture, their autonomy, and comprehensive reparations as victims.

Perhaps many people in the current United States government are unaware that the war has disproportionately affected ethnic groups and that Plan Colombia, a government strategy against drugs, also affected their well-being. In the war on drugs in the 2000s, many ethnic communities lost their food sovereignty, were displaced, and many were murdered.

I say this because in President Trump's inauguration speech, this topic was mentioned in his speech, which he referred to as an unnecessary or useless investment. For us in Colombia, this is one of the best programs developed by USAID with communities, with important results for organizational strengthening, and personnel who today can demonstrate Afro-Colombian and Indigenous people in important government positions.

An ethnic alliance between Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, comprised of the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) and the National Organization of Indigenous People of Colombia (ONIC), supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), called "the Inter-Ethnic Alliance for Peace," was a model worldwide.

The purpose of this project was to implement the Ethnic Chapter. It was implemented with 16 community councils, 24 Indigenous reservations, 18 ethnic organizations, 5 women's organizations, and 10 youth collectives that supported communications initiatives in their territories.

This program sought to strengthen the autonomy of ethnic communities in their territories, as well as the self-government and economies of Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities in five municipalities in Colombia, contributing to reconciliation, ethnic inclusion, socioeconomic development, cultural promotion, and peacebuilding in these territories.

Thanks to the support provided by the United States Congress and social sectors, working with ethnic communities in Colombia, a program for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous people was established in 2010 under USAID-Colombia to facilitate these communities' return to their territories, allowing young Afro-Colombian and Indigenous victims of the war to attend universities with scholarships programs and obtain technical training to work in spaces where it was previously impossible.

USAID established agreements with the private sector to offer training and employment for victims and created programs for social organizations to receive administrative training to strengthen their self-governance. Today, we would have many more people involved in the war, perhaps much more crime, or many more drug traffickers, or seeking to reach the United States due to a lack of opportunities.

The end of USAID not only affected the thousands of workers with whom we implemented programs like this but also affected many communities and many social sectors in Colombia that received support from the United States government in order to avoid growing coca leaves or migrating from their countries. Even to avoid being recruited by armed groups and drug traffickers.

Given this reality, and understanding that the United States is an important ally, it is essential to continue forging bonds of brotherhood and solidarity. Years of work building alliances with communities have roots that cannot be uprooted without considering the social and political consequences.

Never before in Colombia's history have Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities achieved such visibility, or so much social leadership and political participation. Ethnic groups are more visible today in Colombia, have achieved political participation, and have improved their living conditions thanks to the financial support provided by USAID, the solidarity support received from Congress, civil society, and the United States government itself.

Finally, I would like to suggest two key topics for the communities:

1. Strengthen the organizational capacity of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities to strengthen their capacities to defend and promote territorial and human rights, as well as to build and implement territorial peace. And
2. Promote the development of community economies to foster food security and income generation through economic activities consistent with local productive potential.
3. Support, from the United States, the mission of the land restitution unit, an entity in charge of recovering lands that were stolen from ethnic communities, in this government, under the leadership of Director Giovanni Yule, nearly 94,000 (ninety-four thousand) hectares of land have been handed over so far this year to Afro and indigenous communities, in a joint effort with the leaders of the same ethnic communities.

This was the vision and the work that USAID had been developing with these local communities to guarantee their protection, their food sovereignty, and support the return of their lands confiscated by armed groups.

Strengthening the alliance between Colombia and the United States is a fundamental step for its people and for the hemisphere. **Thanks.**