

MEMORANDUM

July 22, 2025

To: Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

From: Clare Ribando Seelke, Specialist in Latin American Affairs, cseelke@crs.loc.gov, 7-5229

Subject: Colombia: Comments for Upcoming Briefing

Good afternoon. My name is Clare Seelke and I am a Specialist in Latin American Affairs at the Congressional Research Service covering Colombia. I am honored to moderate today's briefing entitled, "Colombia: Challenges for Peace and Human Rights," which will have an expert panel of witnesses discussing the implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord; lessons learned from the Gustavo Petro administration's "Total Peace" initiative; challenges facing the Colombian government and peacemakers in Colombia, how other entities can support peace efforts, and the potential role for the U.S. government and Congress.

The Peace Accord, now part of Colombia's Constitution, ended nearly 60 years of armed conflict between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); enabled the demobilization and reintegration into society of 13,000 former FARC fighters; and created mechanisms to identify and redress human rights violations committed during the armed conflict. Several aspects of the Peace Accord are noteworthy. For example,

- The peace negotiations built upon decades of **community-level peacebuilding efforts**, such as the Boyajá community in Chocó that has worked to overcome the 2002 church massacre committed by the FARC.
- **Victims** played a key role in the negotiations and in drafting parts of the agreement, including the gender and ethnic chapters. Notably, displacement and violent crimes committed during the war disproportionately affected Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities.
- In the area of **accountability**, the accord established a transitional justice system for reparations, justice, and protections against further violations. If perpetrators confess human rights violations and other conflict-era crimes they committed to the Special Jurisdiction of Peace court known as "the JEP," often with victims present, they may receive shortened and alternative sentences.

While entities such as the JEP; the Truth Commission that published its findings in 2022 after hearing testimony from more than 30,000 people, and others have taken steps to carry out their prescribed functions since the accord took effect, they have faced challenges that have slowed progress.

After several years of lower crime and violence rates after the accord took effect, violent crime has increased in Colombia over the past 2-3 years, particularly in rural areas. Illegally armed groups are

continuing to fight to control territory—including former FARC-controlled areas—for drug production and trafficking, illegal mining, alien smuggling, and other crimes in areas still lacking state presence.

When President Petro took office in August 2022, he pledged to build on the Peace Accord by engaging in a “Total Peace” initiative to negotiate with remaining armed groups, both with and without political agendas. Total Peace has faced numerous obstacles, however, and most of the nine negotiations appear to have stalled, particularly after groups like the Gulf Clan have attacked security forces and rural communities. Massacres of civilians, killings of human rights defenders, and forced child recruitment are some of the human rights challenges that Colombia is currently facing.

Some analysts also assess that the end of funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), formerly the largest donor supporting peace accord implementation, could further hinder progress.

And in June, following the attempted assassination of Miguel Uribe, a leading 2026 presidential candidate, some policymakers and observers both within and outside of Colombia expressed concerns about a return to past eras of extreme political violence.

Today we have an expert panel to discuss these and other related topics and to reflect upon the future of the Peace Accords in the context of Colombia’s presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 2026, political polarization in Colombia, as well as shifts in U.S. foreign assistance policies, and evolving U.S.-Colombian relations. They are:

Ángela Ramírez is the Executive Director of the Barometer Initiative in Colombia at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. She is a lawyer who has worked in academia, as a consultant for various organizations, and for seven years in the public sector in Colombia.

Monsignor Hector Fabio Henao has been the Episcopal Conference of Colombia Delegate for Church-Colombian State Relations since 2022 and is the Director of the Institute for Peacebuilding Foundation (FICONPAZ). He currently serves as the representative of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia in peace dialogues with different armed groups such as the ELN, CNB and others.

Gimena Sánchez is Director for the Andes and is a human rights and anti-racism advocate at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), where she directs work in Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina.

Marino Córdoba is the founder and legal representative of the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), which brings together more than 126 organizations and community councils. He is also founder and member of the National Afro-Colombian Council of Peace (CONPA) and the Ethnic Commission for Peace and Territorial Defense.