

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on Peace and Victims' Rights in Colombia

Thursday, July 19, 2018, 10:00 a.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Testimony of Luis Fernando Arias Arias of the ONIC (National Organization of Indigenous Colombians) and Ethnic Commission

(Original in Spanish. Translated by the Washington Office of Latin America.)

Good morning to everyone, especially to Representative McGovern.

First of all, I would like to thank you on behalf of the Indigenous People of Colombia, specially from the Ethnic Commission for peace and the defense of human rights.

Secondly, I thank you for this space to testify to the Commission about the situation in Colombia and specifically on the situation of the ethnic groups in our country.

Unfortunately, in this opportunity we must say that the situation in Colombia is just as bad and complex in spite of the peace agreement signed in November 2016. After that date, we have registered more than 300 assassinations, and in the concrete case of the indigenous people, there have been 68 indigenous social leaders murdered during this period, 21 of them during the first semester of this year. As responsible parties, paramilitary groups that have been growing stronger, members of the public forces, and also members of the guerillas that still exist in Colombia. This situation has caused a grave humanitarian crisis and we have asked the Colombian state, and you as well, that it is necessary to strengthen the mechanisms of self-protection.

As of yesterday we have begun a campaign with the Attorney General of Colombia and some members of the communications media called Lead Life (Lidera la Vida) to make the life stories of social leaders visible. Ten social leaders will initiate this campaign between indigenous, Afros, rural farmer leaders, women, and environmentalists that have been murdered as consequence of the violence in our country. We have also urged the strengthening of autonomous protection mechanisms such as the Indigenous Guard and the Cimarrona Guard that are both part of the Ethnic Chapter of the peace agreement.

[Thirdly], we want to express our concern against the declarations of political sectors close to the new government that have announced their vehement opposition and intentions to make shreds of the peace agreement, which worries us because it would mean a return to violence. We are worried that the Democratic Center party (Centro Democrático) will lead a referendum to end the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, JEP), to end the juridical protection on the peace agreement granted by the political constitution. We are also worried about the return of Glyphosate fumigation that in the past,

in the framework of Plan Colombia, was a failure as a strategy. The strategy should be implementing what is stipulated in the peace agreement, fundamentally in point one on Integral Rural Reform and in point three on the substitution plans for crops of illicit use. We want to ask the American Congress and Representative McGovern to not side with this idea of returning to the poison that is Glyphosate that has in the past caused grave irreparable to human life and the environment.

We are also worried that in Colombia, paramilitary groups have been growing, especially due to the political support they have had and still have to this day.

It is also important that from here we can send a message to the new government to maintain the negotiations with the National Liberation Army (Ejército Nacional de Liberación, ELN) in order to achieve a complete peace and hopefully they can soon pact a bilateral cease fire to permit the participation of the citizenship in the framework of this process and we can advance in these processes of transformation that the Colombian state so strongly requires.

From our part we also want to ask this honorable Commission for support in the implementation of the Ethnic Chapter that the indigenous and Afro-Colombian people accomplished, which is in this booklet we will give you so it becomes part of the archives of the American Congress as an effort of the indigenous and Afro-Colombian people to consolidate peace in our country so that here is an ethnic and intercultural focus in the implementation of the peace agreements. Last year we accomplished in the Framework for the Implementation of the peace agreement to establish 86 goals and indicators for the specific implementation of the peace agreement. This is why we also want to ask the brother nation of North America and this Congress' full support and cooperation in the implementation of what is stated in this chapter and specific text that must be developed in the next ten years. We want, Representative McGovern, that this relationship with the indigenous and Afro-Colombian people of Colombia be a direct relationship like we have established with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) here and in Colombia to strengthen our political and organizational processes.

Finally, we want to thank you for all the support and solidarity we have received from you in the past years towards Colombia and especially towards the indigenous and Afro-Colombian people, which have been the principle victims of the armed conflict in Colombia.

Thank you very much.