

**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 Gimena Sanchez, Director for the Andes, Washington Office on  
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I would like to begin by thanking the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for the opportunity to share my perspective on the human rights situation in Colombia, the status of the Colombian peace agreement and transitional justice, and the prospects for enhancing security, human rights, and peacebuilding.

The diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Colombia started 203 years ago and has strengthened over the last 25 years. During this period, the U.S. has had a significant impact on security, peace, and human rights in Colombia. The bilateral relationship has benefited both countries in various areas, including trade, migration, education, labor, and the rights of Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples. The U.S. has invested over \$10 billion in Colombia and considers it its most important security partner in the region. Although there may be different opinions on how best to support Colombia, support for the country has always been bipartisan.

From the late 1990s until 2016, U.S. assistance prioritized counternarcotics and security efforts such as Plan Colombia. While some believe that Plan Colombia was a success story, this approach was flawed <sup>[1]</sup>. Kidnappings and high-level guerrilla attacks decreased, and security forces expanded their presence into areas with historically little to no State presence. It did not fully meet the Plan's own drug reduction goals, as <sup>[2]</sup> reports of extrajudicial killings became commonplace <sup>[3]</sup> the principle of distinction that protects civilians caught during conflict was obliterated, and members of the Colombian armed forces colluded with paramilitaries on the U.S.'s Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list <sup>[4]</sup>.

While the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia -People's Army (FARC-EP) guerrillas suffered major blows, the Colombian armed forces did not defeat them, and

drug trafficking flourished. After all the massacres, human suffering, and cycles of violence, the winds shifted towards seeking a politically negotiated end to the conflict. Eventually, this led to the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC. The U.S.--Colombia's top ally— supported this effort, with the U.S. Special Envoy for Peace, USAID, Congress, and the United Nations all playing significant roles.

While the final peace agreement may be flawed, it succeeded in ending an over five-decade-long conflict and demobilizing 13,000 members of the FARC. Over nine years since its inception, the accord is entering its final five years, designated for implementation. The latest Kroc Institute report,<sup>[5]</sup> which covers the period up to the end of 2024, found that 34% of the 578 commitments were completed, while 19% are in an intermediate stage, with a likelihood of completion by the time the implementation process concludes. Kroc found that another 38% showed minimal progress with little evidence to support completion in time, and 9% had not even started.

During the Ivan Duque government, the peace agreement, as signed, was not advanced; the government halted negotiations with the National Liberation Army <sup>[6]</sup> (*Ejército Nacional de Liberación, ELN*), and the illegal armed groups proliferated. This scenario incentivized President Petro to introduce a Total Peace policy, which incorporates lessons learned from prior demobilization/peace efforts, seeks to bring peace to the territories, and streamline peace efforts within the State.

With a little over a year left in office, the Petro government is simultaneously juggling nine different processes. <sup>[7]</sup> There are six negotiation processes with the National Liberation Army (ELN), Comuneros del Sur (FCS), the Joint Command of Blocs and Fronts (EMBF), the Coordination of the National Bolivarian Army (CNEB), the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), and Self-Defense Forces of the Sierra Nevada (ACSN). Additionally, there are three socio-legal space tables: one in Buenaventura with Shottas and Espartanos, another in Medellín and Valle de Aburrá with Los Pachelly and La Oficina, and a third in Quibdó with five urban criminal groups (Los Mexicanos, Los Locos Yam, the Armed Forces RPS, Cartel del Norte, Revolución Cabí, and Los Zetas). Truces and ceasefires have temporarily reduced violence. Two hundred combatants agreed to demobilize in Nariño <sup>[8]</sup>, and efforts are underway to establish three Temporary Location Zone (ZUT).

Colombia is undergoing a complex and unstable transition. Like many other parts of the world, the country's politics are divided. Election season is nearing. The recent

assassination attempt on Senator Miguel Turbay has rekindled fears <sup>[9]</sup> that the country could revert to its dark past when assassinations of political leaders were frequent.

Although progress has been made toward peace, it has also encountered obstacles. It lacks the congressional support it needs and the legal framework necessary to advance negotiations with groups that lack political recognition. In the haste to broker peace, mistakes have been made. For example, with the ELN, it chose to negotiate with one of its breakaway factions, which damaged trust. It overestimated the unity among FARC dissidents. Each peace process follows its own approach, and there is little coordination among the different efforts.

According to the Colombian organizations Fundación Paz & Reconciliación and Vivamos Humanos, <sup>[10]</sup> as of May 2025, Colombia had experienced 603 violent incidents in 17 regions, affecting 188 municipalities. The areas worst affected were Catatumbo (140), Cauca (96), the Caribbean region (67), Antioquia (63), and Arauca (39). When the first quarter of 2025 is compared to the same period in 2024, there is a 45% increase in the number of violent events (260 to 379 violent events). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports <sup>[11]</sup> that from January to April, the humanitarian situation worsened, affecting more than 953,300 people. On average, 7,900 persons are directly impacted by violence every day, and more than 238,000 are affected every month. The total is four times higher than the number of people affected during the same period in 2024.

Catatumbo <sup>[12]</sup>, Cauca, and Chocó are three areas where violence is generating humanitarian crises. Each situation has its unique regional dynamics, influenced by the status of negotiations with the illegal groups. At the beginning of the year, the region of Catatumbo, situated along the Colombian Venezuelan border, experienced an escalation of violence. The ELN and FARC dissidents of the 33rd Front engaged in violence, killings, and armed combat to control the illicit economies (coca and trafficking). The region experienced one of the worst displacement crises in Colombia's recent history. Thousands were displaced, 80 or more massacred, and others confined. Over 800 people fled to Venezuela. Despite an intensive military effort, militarization, and negotiations with the 33rd Front to establish a ZUT in Tibu, the situation is far from resolved.

On June 10 of this year <sup>[13]</sup>, the southwestern part of Colombia experienced a wave of violence that consisted of over 24 separate violent attacks. Car and motorcycle bombs detonated, cylinder bombs and explosives launched, and gunfire opened in the departments of Cauca and Valle del Cauca. The perpetrators of the attacks were the

FARC dissident groups that are no longer negotiating with the government. At least seven were killed and over 28 were injured.

In Cauca, the effects of the 2016 peace agreement did not last long; the State did not establish a strong presence, and illegal groups took advantage of the resulting vacuum. It is also strategically located for drugs and other criminal activities. Local groups report that there is a deliberate effort by the illegal armed groups to exterminate the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leadership, high levels of forced recruitment, and no effort to prevent harm to civilians.

Humanitarian agencies working in Cauca report numerous obstacles <sup>[14]</sup>. They face restrictions on mobility in 28 of the department's 42 municipalities. More than 806,000 people, primarily Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and rural persons, have limited access to needed services.

In 2024, humanitarian agencies received reports of 43 emergencies due to mass displacement and confinement, affecting more than 39,700 people, approximately 50% of whom are women. In the first two and a half months of 2025<sup>[15]</sup>, seven additional emergencies occurred, affecting more than 22,600 people in the municipalities of Argelia, López de Micay, and Guapi. There are attacks on medical missions, with 47 reports of incidents affecting humanitarian access.

Despite its invisibility, the situation in the majority Afro-Colombian department of Chocó is critical due to the intensification of the armed conflict <sup>[16]</sup>. The urban violence in Quibdó's capital is suffocating. However, very few people are willing to speak out due to pressure exerted upon them by the illegal armed groups. According to local leaders, there is no trust in the security forces since some of their members have ties with illegal armed groups, namely the Gulf Clan, and they receive zero response from local authorities when they ask for protection. Social leaders are threatened if they try to raise awareness of the violent disputes between the groups, forced recruitment of youth, and human rights violations.

On human rights, we are deeply concerned about the ongoing persecution, harassment, and killing of social leaders and the murder of former FARC combatants, and the lack of justice in these cases. In 2025, according to the Institute for the Study of Development and Peace (*Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, INDEPAZ*), from January 1 to July 14 alone, 88 social leaders and 28 former FARC combatants were murdered. <sup>[17]</sup> At WOLA, we continually issue urgent updates regarding attacks against human rights defenders, social leaders, and civilian communities caught in conflict. <sup>[18]</sup>

Even with all the problems, victims and communities continue to clamor for peace and advocate for negotiated solutions to violence. The Petro government needs to prioritize and intensify its implementation of the 2016 peace accord. It should evaluate the feasibility of each process, advance the ones with the most progress, and put in place plans so that the next government can continue those with the most promise. In the meantime, the dialogues taking place need to negotiate humanitarian accords that protect civilians while the process is in place. Illegal armed groups should be pressured at the negotiating table to implement the humanitarian pacts they subscribed to. At the same time, the government must advance these processes without compromising its security policy.

The 2016 agreement remains the best framework for addressing deep-seated structural problems—land reform, political participation, illicit crops, truth and justice for victims, and the specific concerns of ethnic minorities and women. It deepened and diversified Colombia's democracy. There are no quick fixes for these structural issues, which require long-term, sustained support from the U.S. and international community. While imperfect without the peace agreement and the essential role played by the United Nations in Colombia, the situation would be more adverse. Unlike most parts of the world, in Colombia, there is an effort to end the conflicts, violence, and their structural roots through negotiation and community participation. Efforts are underway to address the rights of victims.

The U.S. has invested a lot in peace in Colombia. Suppose it wants to see stabilization of conflict areas, extend an integral State presence in regions dominated by illegal armed groups and illicit economies. In that case, it should continue to support its ally. If the U.S. wants to prevent migration, then Colombia needs peace and humanitarian assistance to be able to integrate migrants and to avoid the outmigration of Venezuelans and Colombians. Part of the solution to the violence in Catatumbo and Cauca depends on the long-term process outlined in the 2016 peace accord. In the recently passed House version of the 2026 foreign appropriations bill, the stated goals of U.S. governmental interests in Colombia include: "mitigating irregular migration; supporting rule of law, democracy and strong institutions; and countering narcotics trafficking, terrorist organizations, and human trafficking."<sup>[19]</sup> To achieve this, in addition to advancing peace, Congress must appropriate the necessary funds to support non-security efforts required to achieve these goals. Cutting all the programs run by USAID was counterproductive to U.S. interests. Congress must reassess how it can support needed projects through another mechanism.

In many ways, Colombia's transformation is a global success story. While serious problems remain, this is not the time for the U.S. to abandon efforts in Colombia. Suppose the U.S. distances itself from countries like Colombia in the region and narrows its engagement to a narrow view of security. In that case, it risks those countries forming alliances with countries the U.S. sees as economic competitors, such as China <sup>[20]</sup>.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Haugaard, Lisa, Sánchez-Garzoli, Gimena, Isacson, Adam, Walsh, John, Guiteau, Robert. A Compass for Colombia Policy, LAWG, CIP, WOLA and USOC. Washington, DC. October 2008.

<sup>[2]</sup> United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), PLAN COLOMBIA: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance, Washington, DC, October 2008.

<sup>[3]</sup> International Criminal Court. Situation in Colombia Interim Report, November 2012.

<sup>[4]</sup> U.S. State Department. Designation of the AUC As a Foreign Terrorist Organization. September 10, 2001.

<sup>[5]</sup> Echavarría, Josefina; Vásquez, Mateo Gómez; Linares, Brenda Forero; Giraldo, Ever Álvarez; Bravo, Jaime Astaíza; Giancola, Mariana Balen; et al. (2025). Navigating the Waters of Peace: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities in the Eighth Year of Implementation December 2023–November 2024. University of Notre Dame. Report. <https://doi.org/10.7274/29155028.v1>

<sup>[6]</sup> El Colombiano. “Duque rompe diálogos con el Eln y reactiva órdenes de captura.” 18 enero 2019.

<sup>[7]</sup> For more details listen to WOLA's podcast: “Simultaneously juggling nine processes at once”: Colombia's “Total Peace” plan and mounting security challenges, June 30, 2025. <https://www.wola.org/multimedia/simultaneously-juggling-nine-processes-at-once-colombias-total-peace-plan-and-mounting-security-challenges/>

<sup>[8]</sup> Sanchez-Garzoli, Gimena. Colombian Dissident Guerillas Agree to Disarm, Although Total Peace Remains Elusive. WOLA. April 29, 2025. <https://www.wola.org/analysis/colombian-eln-disarm-total-peace-remains-elusive/>

<sup>[9]</sup> WOLA. Colombia Must Not Backtrack into Political Violence. June 10, 2025.

<sup>[10]</sup> Fundación Paz & Reconciliación y Vivamos Humanos. La paz ¿Cómo vamos? Radiografía de los procesos de diálogo de paz en Colombia entre 2022-2025. 18 junio 2025.

<sup>[11]</sup> UNOCHA. Humanitarian Trends and Impact Report 2025: Data compiled between January and March 2025. May 16, 2025.

<sup>[12]</sup> WOLA. Urgent Call to End Violence and Address Humanitarian Crisis in Catatumbo. January 19, 2025.

<sup>[13]</sup> WOLA. New Wave of Violence in Colombia Signals Need for New Approach from Colombian Government. June 13, 2025.

<sup>[14]</sup> UNOCHA. Situación Humanitaria en Cauca (Colombia), 13 de marzo, 2025.

<sup>[15]</sup> Equipo Humanitario País (EHP). Situación Humanitaria en Cauca (Colombia), 13 de marzo, 2025.

<sup>[16]</sup> WOLA confidential interviews with social leaders in the Department of Choco, June 2025.

<sup>[17]</sup> Observatorio de Derechos Humanos y Conflictividades de Indepaz. LÍDERES SOCIALES, DEFENSORES DE DD.HH. Y FIRMANTES DE ACUERDO ASESINADOS EN 2024 Y 2025. <https://indepaz.org.co/lideres-sociales-defensores-de-dd-hh-y-firmantes-de-acuerdo-asesinados-en-2024/>

<sup>[18]</sup> See WOLA's urgent actions: <https://www.wola.org/category/the-latest/urgent-actions/>

<sup>[19]</sup> <https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-appropriations.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/fy26-national-security%2C-department-of-state%2C-and-related-programs-bill-text.pdf>

<sup>[20]</sup> Sanchez-Garzoli, Gimena. U.S. Pushes Its Historic South American Ally Towards China, WOLA, February 18, 2025.

WOLA co-sponsors with Colombia Acuerdo de Paz NGO, La Nueva Prensa, International Institute for Race and Equality, Contagio Radio and others the program Colombia Acuerdo de Paz which features discussions from the perspectives of social leaders, Afro-Colombians, Indigenous, Women, LGBTQ persons, former combatants, victims, journalists, experts, U.S. and Colombian policymakers about a myriad of issues related to the Colombia 2016 peace accord and related issues. These programs can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5Jv4SY58M>

