

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

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

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Statement of Monsignor Héctor Fabio Henao Gaviria
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**Strengthening Peace Through Participation: Colombia's Territorial Peace, Reconciliation and
Coexistence Councils**

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One of the cornerstones for the effective implementation of Colombia's Peace Agreement is participation—particularly citizen participation. It is through inclusive and democratic spaces that communities can take ownership of the peacebuilding process and contribute to a more just and stable society. In this regard, the Territorial Peace, Reconciliation, and Coexistence Councils have emerged as a key mechanism for consolidating participation and ensuring that civil society plays an active role in shaping and sustaining peace.

These Councils are perhaps the most broad-based and diverse participatory mechanisms in the country, bringing together a wide range of actors from both civil society and institutional frameworks. They serve as points of convergence where civil society—with all the richness and diversity it embodies—meets with government authorities to design and coordinate actions for peace, reconciliation, and coexistence.

With the support of the Government of the United States, through the Department of State and its Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, significant progress has been made in strengthening these participatory structures and advancing Colombia's reconciliation efforts. Since 2020, the *Program for Strengthening Colombia's Territorial Peace Councils*—known as ConPaz—has worked to enhance the technical, relational, and organizational capacities of these Councils, enabling them to fulfill their mission as plural and participatory spaces that bridge civil society and state institutions.

Through this partnership, important achievements have been realized. ConPaz has contributed to the creation of Colombia's *National Reconciliation Policy* and supported the integration of these Peace Councils into territorial development plans, ensuring that local peacebuilding efforts are aligned with broader national strategies. These efforts have strengthened relationships between civil society and government authorities, leading to the recognition of the Peace Councils as a key part of Colombia's territorial peace infrastructure.

As part of this process, more than 150 Peace Councils across the country have been strengthened. Through regional and national gatherings organized by the ConPaz program,

opportunities have been created for Council members to exchange and systematize successful practices, fostering learning and replication of local initiatives. Technical guidance and facilitation provided by ConPaz have also enabled dialogue between Peace Councils and local authorities, resulting in coordinated action plans and concrete proposals to address the needs of vulnerable communities.

In addition, ConPaz has developed and consolidated an innovative online platform—*La Despensa de la Paz*—a comprehensive toolbox designed to support the work of Peace Councils and to equip them with the resources they need to promote reconciliation, strengthen local governance, and advance the exercise of full citizenship and rights.

Through these initiatives, the program has helped strengthen local governance, empower communities, and foster alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution. It has also reinforced the role of Peace Councils as critical actors in protecting social leaders and advancing collective agendas for participation and territorial development.

Yet, despite these achievements, significant challenges remain. To sustain and deepen the peacebuilding process, we must continue strengthening participatory mechanisms that bring together diverse voices from Colombia's territories. This is essential for advancing key aspects of the Peace Agreement's implementation and addressing urgent national priorities, including protecting social leaders, safeguarding former combatants, consolidating territorial participation agendas, and equipping communities with tools for conflict resolution and for exercising their right to peace.

Colombia's Peace Councils stand today as vibrant spaces of hope and collaboration. Their success is a testament to what is possible when civil society and institutions work hand in hand, and when international allies like the United States invest in strengthening the foundations of peace.