



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing  
**PROTESTS IN COLOMBIA**

Thursday, July 1, 2021  
1:00 p.m. – 3:00 pm  
Virtual via Cisco WebEx

**Rep. Christopher H. Smith**

**Excerpt of Remarks**

I'd like to begin by thanking Co-Chair McGovern for convening today's hearing.

I would like to say at the outset, however, that I am concerned not so much about this hearing containing fabricated narratives, but rather, incomplete ones.

Beyond focusing simply on the government's actions, I think it is important to consider and keep in mind the role which bad actors both inside and outside the country have played in exacerbating social tension and taking advantage of legitimate grievances – and let me be clear, there are legitimate grievances – to advance an ultimately destructive agenda.

We will hear from several witnesses today who will state that Colombia is in upheaval today because of tax hikes,

inequality, and an economy damaged by COVID 19. While they are doubtlessly correct, that is only part of the story.

Some of the violence is likely opportunistic criminality. Other violence, however, has the hallmarks of being organized.

The Colombian government reported that from April 28 of this year – soon after the tax proposal was introduced – to June 24, a wave of vandalism, burning and destruction directed against financial institutions, public transportation vehicles, ambulances and police officers has afflicted the country.

The tally of the damage includes the following:

- 472 commercial establishments
- 460 bank offices
- 1,317 public transportation vehicles
- 249 public transportation stations or stops
- 443 ATM machines
- 92 service stations
- 109 ambulances and
- 3 houses of worship or religious institutions

That is the toll on property. Lives lost, as of June 15 per the government, include 54 civilians, of which 24 are concededly related to the protests, and 11 more may be as

well. The remaining 19 are deaths which the government contends are unrelated to the protests.

Additionally, 1,140 civilians have been injured throughout the country as of June 24 – not just in Bogotá, but also in places like Cali, Medellin and Valle de Cauca. [VA-yay day Cow-ka]

Beyond these civilian casualties, there have been 2 police officers killed, and 1,454 police officers injured, including 6 who remained hospitalized as of June 24.

We also have to ask what is the economic and social cost of the more than 14,000 incidents of protest activity in a country coming out of a Covid lockdown, including some 3,500 blockades.

How are the blockades exacerbating food, medicine and goods shortages? This is a particularly pertinent question with regard to the disenfranchised and rural areas of the country, as well as disenfranchised individuals, as well as disenfranchised individuals including refugees from Venezuela.

As Jose Cardenas points out in his opening testimony—I think it's worth underscoring—"in February 2021, setting a standard for the entire region and amid its own devastating pandemic challenges, Colombian President Ivan Duque

announced that Colombia would grant temporary protected status to nearly 2 million Venezuelans fleeing their own disastrous situation next door.”

And we also have to take a hard look at whether these protests are truly spontaneous, or are they organized, and by whom?

In particular, I think it is very important to look at the role which ELN – the abbreviation for Ejército de Liberación Nacional, commonly known as the National Liberation Army in English – may be playing in the current unrest. The same is true for FARC, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios de Colombia, or Armed Forces of Colombia.

And then there is the role of outside actors, in particular, Venezuela and Cuba.

There are two statements for the record which I would like to introduce which address the role of outside actors, from the researcher Maria Werlau and from Colombian Senator Maria Fernanda Cabal.

Ms. Werlau notes the long-term interest Cuba has had in Colombia, and its use of its embassy as an intelligence center:

The intelligence center, operating within the embassy, greatly increased the number of ‘diplomats’ (most are spies) during the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos. The head of the intelligence center, officially accredited as Minister Counselor, was a seasoned Colonel with a distinguished career, and nearly 40 years of service, Juan Loforte Osorio.

Loforte was exposed in the press and transferred from Colombia in 2014, according to Ms. Werlau.

The Cuban hand continues to meddle, however, and in May of this year, President Duque expelled Omar Rafael García Lazo, who, until recently, ostensibly served as the First Secretary for the Cuban embassy in Bogotá, but [really functioned as a Cuban intelligence agent](#). In a [May 7 statement](#), the Colombian Foreign Ministry – in diplomatic speak – confirmed that his conduct was incompatible with the with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, and he had been seeking to foment divisions among the Colombian people.

And then there is Venezuela.

Colombia’s Defense Minister [Diego Molano protested recently the presence of Venezuelans](#) in the protests.

[Ecuador's former President Lenin Moreno stated flatly](#)

Our and Colombia's intelligence agencies have detected a gross intervention from the dictatorial and authoritarian regime of Nicolás Maduro [in the Colombian protests] (...) We call on Maduro to remove his bloody and corrupt hands from the democracy and stability of the Colombian people.

Venezuela's direct intervention in previous protests led to the [expulsion of 59](#) QUOTE UNQUOTE "diplomats" in 2019, plus another [six this past May](#) who were participating in protests in Valle de Cauca [VA-yay day Cow-ka].

In her statement for the record, Colombian Senator María Fernanda Cabal noted that leftwing messaging regarding the protests has been amplified by 7,000 bots located in countries such as Russia.

She also notes – as have others – that the protests in Colombia have followed a template we have seen elsewhere, such as in Ecuador when then President Lenin Moreno lifted gasoline subsidies, and in Chile, when subway ticket prices increased in Santiago.

There does seem to be a larger agenda, then, than just simply protests sparked by the proposed tax increases, which, incidentally, have been withdrawn.

As one of our witnesses, José Cárdenas [Ho-SAY CAHR-day-nas] has pointed out, Colombia has a functioning system and institutions, and an ability to self-correct, either via democratic elections or via accountability mechanisms. As he notes is QUOTE “Colombia is not Venezuela. It is not Cuba. It is not Nicaragua.”

And I would note, in all three countries – Nicaragua, Venezuela and most especially, Cuba – the human rights situation overall, and in particular with regard to civil and political liberties, is far worse than anything we are seeing in Colombia.

Which gives rise to a serious question: What is the end game here? While the answer may differ depending on who is asked, for some, is it to turn Colombia into another Nicaragua, another Venezuela, another Cuba?

With that I yield back, and I look forward to hearing all of your testimony.