



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Protests in Colombia**

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

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the recent protests in Colombia.

I extend a special welcome to our witnesses who I will introduce shortly. I should mention that three of them are joining us from Bogota, so let's hope our virtual technology holds up.

The last two months have seen massive multi-sectoral, multigenerational protests throughout Colombia that started in response to an ill-advised tax reform proposal presented by President Ivan Duque's government.

Whatever its possible merits, what stood out to the public was that taxes were going up for lower and middle-income people who had already been battered economically by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The popular response was like that classic line from the movie *Network*: "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore." People took to the streets and four days later the government rescinded the tax proposal. But the protests didn't stop.

It turns out that the tax proposal was just the tip of the iceberg. The problems that kept the protests going for over two months are far deeper than one poorly-designed tax bill.

What problems are Colombians marching and talking about? Let me flag them for you.

Income inequality in Colombia is among the highest in Latin America and has worsened since 2017<sup>1</sup>. A 2018 O.E.C.D. study found that a Colombian child born into poverty would need 11 generations – some 330 years – to achieve middle income.<sup>2</sup> This means there is little to no social mobility.

Control of productive land in Colombia is the most unequal in the region. It is far more concentrated today than in the late 1990s. In 2016 the top one-tenth of one percent of farms controlled nearly 60% of land, while the bottom 80% controlled only 5%.<sup>3</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating. As we speak, the daily per capita number of newly confirmed cases is the highest in the western hemisphere.<sup>4</sup> Colombia has the 14th highest per capita death rate from COVID-19 in the world.<sup>5</sup> In Latin America, only Peru and Brazil have fared worse.

The hospital system is overwhelmed.<sup>6</sup> For months, vaccinations lagged. As of now, only 12% of the population has been fully vaccinated. Meanwhile, the government has relaxed COVID-related public health restrictions.

People are poor. Poverty was already widespread before the pandemic – 36% in December 2019. A year later it reached 43%. According to official figures, the pandemic pushed 3.5 million more people into poverty.

For those who may not be aware, the official poverty line in Colombia is very low, approximately US\$92 per month. Of Colombia's 51 million people, 21 million live on less than that.<sup>7</sup> Even worse, 7.5 million live on less than US\$40 per month.<sup>8</sup>

Youth have few to no prospects. Fully a third of young people aged 14 to 28 are “*nini*” — neither in school nor working. Colombia's students have been kept out of school by the pandemic longer than any other country in the hemisphere.

People are hungry. This January, the World Food Program reported that up to 48% of Colombians – and 71% of the Venezuelan migrant population – faced moderate to severe food

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<sup>1</sup> GINI in 2017 – 49.7; GINI in 2019 – 51.3. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=CO>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2018/06/18/en-colombia-hacen-falta-11-generaciones-para-que-una-familia-supere-la-pobreza-segun-la-ocde/>

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam, Radiografía de la desigualdad, 2016

<sup>4</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/colombia>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.elespectador.com/bogota/los-otros-afectados-por-los-picos-de-la-pandemia-en-bogota-articulo/>

<sup>7</sup> Calculation: 331,688 COP/3600 COP. <https://www.larepublica.co/economia/mas-de-21-millones-de-personas-viven-en-la-pobreza-y-74-millones-en-pobreza-extrema-3161813>

<sup>8</sup> Calculation: 145,004 COP/3600 COP

insecurity as of January.<sup>9</sup> According to the 2020 Global Hunger Index, more than 10% of children under 5 experience stunting.<sup>10</sup> Stunting is what happens when a child lacks access to important nutrients, especially during the crucial first 1,000 days of their life. Stunting makes children more susceptible to disease and infection, and impairs their mental and physical development.

In Cali, young people reported that the community kitchens set up to support the protests provided them with more access to food than they had at home. No one should be surprised that food security is a top demand of the protesters.

So no one should wonder why there is unrest and protest. Colombia's model is not working for the great majority of its people.

The government's heavy-handed response to the protests made things worse. As of June 22, according to an analysis by *La Silla Vacía*, at least 47 people have died.<sup>11</sup> Twenty-nine of them were under the age of 25.

In 39 of those cases, there are links to the police who dramatically and visibly overreacted to protests that were overwhelmingly peaceful.

In 16 of the cases, there is evidence of involvement by armed civilians, renewing the specter of paramilitarism.

Hundreds of other serious human rights violations have been reported, including detentions, possible forced disappearances, and rapes and sexual violence. All of these abuses must be investigated and the perpetrators punished.

Predictably, some commentators are arguing that the unrest in Colombia is somehow due to nefarious outside actors like Cuba and Venezuela. Or it's the work of guerrilla groups. Or it's the work of one or another left-leaning politician they don't like. Or it's because of organized crime.

But this is simply not true. These protests have not been ginned up by outsiders or purported bad actors. This is the *third* time Colombians have taken to the streets since November

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<sup>9</sup> WFP Colombia Country Brief, March 2021. [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000126912/download/?\\_ga=2.84482137.1199565731.1625169152-958170499.1625015624](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000126912/download/?_ga=2.84482137.1199565731.1625169152-958170499.1625015624)

<sup>10</sup> Global Hunger Index 2020: Colombia, October 2020. <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2020/Colombia.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> *La Silla Vacía*, En el paro nacional mataron a 47 personas y la Fiscalía solo cuenta 24, June 22, 2021. <https://lasillavacia.com/historias/silla-nacional/en-el-paro-fueron-asesinadas-47-personas-y-la-fiscal%C3%ADa-solo-cuenta-24/>

2019 in reaction to failed policies and unresponsive government. This pot has been boiling for a long time.

Could some actors take advantage of such widespread social discontent for their own purposes? Maybe — if those who have the power to address these deep structural problems fail in their responsibility to do so.

And what is our responsibility here in the United States? How can we make sure we are part of the solution, not part of the problem?

I and many of my colleagues have already called for the suspension of U.S. direct assistance to Colombia's National Police until we see judicial accountability for police brutality. We also called for the freezing of any grants or sales of riot or crowd control equipment to all Colombian security forces. I believe top-to-bottom reform of the police must be on the table.

Even before the recent protests, over the past three years, we have witnessed increasing human rights abuses by the National Police, including massacres of civilians. Members of Congress shared their alarm with House appropriators and I am pleased to see the FY 2022 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill extends human rights conditions to U.S. aid directly benefitting the Colombian police.

On drug-trafficking, the issue that has dominated U.S. policy toward Colombia for far too long, two decades of security assistance have not transformed the conditions that make coca the only viable crop for thousands of small growers.

On the contrary: when Plan Colombia launched in 1999, Colombia was cultivating 160,000 hectares of coca.<sup>12</sup> On June 25, the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy announced that coca cultivation in Colombia reached 245,000 hectares in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Cultivation has increased by 37,000 hectares just since 2018. Things are going backwards.

Which brings me to the 2016 peace accords, negotiated with the strong backing of the U.S. government.

Chapter 1 of the accord focused on comprehensive rural reform to foster the transformation and full development of rural areas.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/cache/files/a/5/a51ee680-e339-4a1b-933f-b15e535fa103/AA2A3440265DDE42367A79D4BCBC9AA1.whdpc-final-report-2020-11.30.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2gP5pOrTbT6tjJS\\_r5VWtcptHDNpSa9Uhc8c0Y5qw8TV6QIIgfB4hlcq4](https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/cache/files/a/5/a51ee680-e339-4a1b-933f-b15e535fa103/AA2A3440265DDE42367A79D4BCBC9AA1.whdpc-final-report-2020-11.30.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2gP5pOrTbT6tjJS_r5VWtcptHDNpSa9Uhc8c0Y5qw8TV6QIIgfB4hlcq4)

<sup>13</sup> Press Release, "ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Potential Cocaine Production in the Andean Region," June 25, 2021. <https://co.usembassy.gov/ondcp-releases-data-on-coca-cultivation-and-production-in-the-andean-region/>

Chapter 4 committed the parties to work towards a definitive solution to the problem of illicit drugs in part by undertaking a major crop substitution program that was supposed to be linked to comprehensive rural reform.

The failure to fully implement these chapters is a major missed opportunity that is reflected in those coca cultivation numbers.

I am not saying that implementation of the peace accord is the answer to all the problems driving the recent protests. I hope to travel to Colombia soon to meet with indigenous leaders, Afro-Colombians, unions, students, campesinos, human rights defenders, and as many other sectors and populations as I can, to hear their concerns and proposals directly.

But I do believe a recommitment to the full implementation of the peace accord provides the best starting point for a necessary re-set of the U.S.-Colombian bilateral relationship.

We must make sure that our diplomatic engagement and foreign assistance are contributing to the full satisfaction of all the human rights of all of Colombia's people.

We must be on the side of the young people who are telling anyone who will listen that they feel they have nothing left to lose.

In that spirit, I look forward to the recommendations of our witnesses.

Without objection, we will enter into the hearing record the names of the 47 people confirmed killed in the context of the protests.

Before turning to our witnesses, I yield to Commission Co-Chair Smith for his opening remarks.