

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Protests in Colombia

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Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to address the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and to discuss the critical situation in Colombia. International Crisis Group is a global organization committed to the prevention, mitigation and resolution of deadly conflict. We cover over 50 conflict situations around the world and our presence in Colombia dates back more than 20 years. It is in the spirit of our conflict prevention mission that I hope to speak to you today.

Colombia is locked in its worst bout of unrest in recent memory. Peaceful protests have erupted in all of Colombia's departments, rural and urban, involving a broad array of social groups. The government's response has leaned heavily on the security forces. Bogotá's belated and wavering commitment to negotiations has inflamed tensions.

This simmering crisis could jeopardize Colombia's chance at consolidating a fragile and incomplete peace, following the signing of a 2016 peace deal to end decades of conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Unless decisive action is taken to address the inequality, lack of opportunity and police violence that have brought tens of thousands of Colombians to the streets in the context of an unrelenting pandemic, demonstrations will most likely continue to erupt, creating further instability and with it grave risks.

Police brutality could further erode the force's legitimacy in the eyes of the public, making it increasingly difficult to secure vulnerable communities and entrenching a contentious relationship with protesters. Right-wing vigilante violence against demonstrators could grow more lethal and organized. Such turmoil could generate more opportunities for armed and criminal groups to consolidate their control, above all in rural areas long affected by conflict. These high stakes are exactly why the United States should take a greater role in working to calm the tensions that are roiling this critically important regional ally. After years of U.S. investment to help Colombia find a path toward greater peace and prosperity, it would be a mistake for the United States to stand on the sidelines now.

I speak to you today having spent the last two months traveling across Colombia to both rural and urban protest sites, including the city of Cali along the Pacific coast, Guaviare in the

southern Amazon region, Catatumbo along the border with Venezuela, and of course Bogotá, where I reside. My comments are based on this field research as well as conversations with dozens of local and national officials, military personnel, civil society and religious figures. Crisis Group has detailed our full conclusions in a report published on 2 July, which I commend to you.

I will first address why the protests are happening, then discuss risks of escalation and finally outline ways we believe the United States could help.

Colombia's protests reflect the "accumulation of decades of injustice", as one 28-year-old protester in Bogotá put it. They began over a controversial tax reform, but have since extended to reflect deep socio-economic grievances and anger at the security forces. At their peak in May, marches took place nationwide daily. Protestors also erected a series of roadblocks within cities and on major interstate highways to draw attention to their cause.

Two key benchmarks are vital to understanding why the protests are happening now: They are taking place after a year of worsening pandemic, and five years since the signing of Colombia's peace accord with the FARC.

During five decades of armed conflict, the country's main political parties pushed aside fundamental questions about inequality and economic opportunity in deference to the scale of the insurgent and criminal threats facing the Colombian state.

Since the 2016 peace accord, however, the stigma of association with the guerrillas no longer constrains left-leaning activism, while long-standing rifts and resentments in Colombian society have grown more pronounced. Colombia is deeply unequal, and its elites tend to be entrenched and protective of their entitlements. According to the OECD, it would take eleven generations for descendants of a poor family to reach the average income.

A year of on-and-off lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have only served to intensify the experience of inequality, particularly among the urban poor who disproportionately work in informal jobs and were hit hardest by movement restrictions. As of 2020, 42.5 per cent of Colombia's population was living below the poverty line.

In impoverished rural areas, which were promised a sweeping transformation in the 2016 peace accord, protesters say their lives have seen little improvement; instead, they have been left waiting for promised government support as expanding armed groups have made their livelihoods and physical safety even more precarious.

Fueled by a wealth of grievances, it is no surprise that the protests are widely supported. According to polls, 84 per cent of young people and 75 per cent of all Colombians view the demonstrations favorably, although some of the protesters' actions were less popular.

(Roadblocks, which have almost all now been lifted, drew strong public criticism because of the deep economic damage they caused.)

The government was late to acknowledge the extent of discontent and even now it struggles to express empathy for people who have taken to the streets. Top officials have described protesters as troublemakers, vandals and urban terrorists. Together with documented police misconduct, the government's reactions have at times added fuel to the fire.

Although the number of protests declined in June, we should not be lulled into believing the turmoil is over. The strike committee has called for new mass protests on 20 July. Unrest is likely to affect Colombia in the run-up to the May 2022 presidential elections. Political forces on all sides may be tempted to let the crisis simmer to appeal to and invigorate their support bases, but there are at least three serious risks to doing so:

1. **Continued police brutality that escalates conflict with protestors and erodes the force's credibility and ability to operate.** Despite ample evidence of abuse against protestors, the police have faced few repercussions for misbehaviour and instead continue to hear unequivocal support from their chain of command. If protests spike again, this lack of accountability might embolden the police to skirt the law and use additional force. Yet the record of abuses without transparent consequences endangers the long term credibility of the institution, undermining its ability to control crime and protect vulnerable communities.
2. **Right wing opposition to protests could erupt into further vigilante violence.** Groups of armed civilians, at times visibly organized, have on several occasions fired upon protestors without police intervening to stop them. In cities such as Cali, where the population is heavily armed, a deep history of right-wing paramilitary activity raises concerns that these groups could grow, become more entrenched, and use increasingly brazen violence against left-leaning activists.
3. **Armed and criminal groups could dig in.** The evidence shows that illegal armed and criminal groups neither organised the protests nor are they a driving force behind participation. But they may prove to be the beneficiaries of prolonged unrest. In urban areas, roadblocks cordoned off whole parts of cities such as Cali, creating grey zones over which the state had no control. Despite the fact that most barricades are now lifted, authorities may struggle to re-establish a presence in these areas. Communities are unlikely to permit police patrols again. Local urban criminals, by contrast, have behaved with savvy, broadly showing solidarity with the national strike. This has won them local credibility and may facilitate collaboration, voluntary and coerced.

Rural areas are even more vulnerable to exploitation by armed outfits. As soon as protestors erected roadblocks, armed groups saw the benefits in having parts of the

countryside cut off from the state and its security forces. They used the opportunity to impose new taxes, intimidate residents and, by some accounts, expand trafficking. As a senior military officer told us, “armed groups have discovered that protests are a good shield to hide behind”. The unpopularity of the government’s response to protestors’ demands, meanwhile, has breathed new oxygen into these groups’ political rhetoric. Armed groups’ entrenchment may well be long lasting: Colombia has learned time and time again that it is far easier for these groups to implant themselves in an area than to extract them from it. Deteriorating security conditions will further undermine and delay implementation of the 2016 peace accord.

In this alarming context, we suggest the United States should actively encourage the Colombian government to reopen negotiations with protest leaders and consider serious reforms to address the drivers of unrest. Specifically, the US could:

1. **Express and offer support for comprehensive police reform.** Colombia’s police force operates under an antiquated framework that is poorly matched to today’s challenges. It was built as a counter-insurgency force and remains part of the Defense Ministry. As a result, police are ill prepared to face unarmed protesters who are not enemies, but citizens whom they have a constitutional duty to protect. Unless Colombia can effectively address these issues, the police will continue to lose credibility. While President Ivan Duque’s June 6 proposal for police reform is a step in the right direction, it falls short in ways I am happy to discuss.
2. **Communicate the importance of a negotiated solution** with demonstrators. Crucially, Bogotá needs simultaneously to hold national talks while committing to participate in local dialogue processes and facilitate decision-making at that level. Many local negotiations have made real progress but foundered because the resolutions they reach ultimately require Bogotá’s sign-off. As a negotiator in Catatumbo told me, “the regions have done our work; we have reached agreements and lifted the blockades. But we are waiting for the national government to show up.”
3. **Continue to support the complete implementation of the 2016 peace agreement.** The accord provides a roadmap to addressing rural grievances and addressing historical debts to the countryside. Specifically, the accord includes key reforms to the rural economy, increased political participation, and voluntary coca crop substitution – all measures that dovetail with protestors’ demands today. Ultimately, peace will depend upon Colombia committing to the long-term process of opening up access to social mobility and economic opportunity for its marginalized citizens.

I look forward to discussing this further and to your questions.