

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Protests in Colombia

July 1, 2021 - 1:00 pm
Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of José Miguel Vivanco,
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Mr. Chairman, Committee members:

Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on behalf of Human Rights Watch (HRW) to discuss the current situation in Colombia.

This hearing is timely and important. HRW is more concerned about the current situation in Colombia than it had been in several years.

Since April 28, tens of thousands of Colombians have taken to the streets to protest about a range of issues, including economic inequality, police violence, unemployment, and poor public services. These protests are ongoing, even if the national strike is officially over.

A team of HRW researchers has been following the situation closely. We have conducted more than 170 interviews with people in 26 cities across Colombia, obtained extensive information from Colombian authorities, and reviewed a wide range of sources, including necropsy reports and independent evaluations by international forensic experts.

We concluded that Colombian police officers have repeatedly and arbitrarily dispersed peaceful demonstrations and used excessive, and often brutal, force, including firing live ammunition. I presented these findings to President Iván Duque on June 9.

We have gathered first-hand evidence indicating that the police have killed at least 25 protesters or bystanders and engaged in multiple cases of beatings and sexual abuse, as well as hundreds of arbitrary detentions.

The police killed at least 18 protesters or bystanders with live ammunition. The vast majority of them had injuries in vital organs, such as the thorax and head, which are consistent with being caused with the intent to kill.

Armed people in civilian clothes have also attacked protesters, killing at least five. The police have at times failed to take action to prevent or stop these attacks.

Over 1,100 protesters and bystanders have been injured since April 28. Some have suffered permanent loss of vision in one eye, apparently due to the impact of teargas cartridges or kinetic impact projectiles.

While most demonstrations were peaceful, some individuals engaged in serious acts of violence, including attacking police officers. Hundreds of police officers have been injured, over 190 of them severely, and 3 have died.

Some protesters blocked roads for prolonged periods, at times impeding the distribution of food or the circulation of ambulances. Fortunately, these road blockings have dramatically decreased in recent weeks.

Violence against police officers and road blocking that impedes access to food or health services are unjustifiable, but they are no excuse for police brutality.

The Colombian police had already engaged in serious abuses against protesters in 2019 and 2020. These abuses are not isolated incidents by rogue officers, but rather the result of systemic shortcomings of the Colombian police.

The police is, unlike in any other country in Latin America, under the authority of the Defense Ministry and has been deployed to fight armed groups alongside the armed forces, in a manner that has often blurred their distinct functions. Additionally, the police's disciplinary system lacks independence and officers implicated in abuses are also often tried in military courts, where there is little chance of accountability.

President Duque announced that his government would take steps to “transform” the police. Some of those initiatives, such as a proposed reform to the police's disciplinary system, could have a positive impact on police abuses if properly designed. But, overall, the changes announced fall short. Critically, these fail to transfer the police to the Ministry of Interior—and don't limit the military justice system's ability to handle investigations into abuses.

President Duque has also acknowledged that the police committed some abuses and said the officers involved would be punished. He says his government has a “zero tolerance” policy toward abuse.

But these commitments cannot be taken at face value. So far, Colombian authorities have failed to achieve meaningful progress in prosecuting officers involved in the police abuses committed against protesters in 2019 and 2020. No officer has been criminally convicted in these cases so far.

The US Congress and the Biden administration have a critically important role to play in ending these abuses. We recommend that the members of the House:

1. Continue to condemn police abuses in Colombia and call on the Biden administration to ensure a more vocal, public messaging about the situation in the country.
2. Condition assistance to Colombia, including funds under the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement heading, to there being meaningful progress in the prosecution of officers responsible for abuses and reforms to the police in order to prevent further violations.
3. Press Colombian authorities to suspend the use of “less-lethal weapons”, including kinetic impact projectiles, which have been dangerously used against protesters, causing multiple injuries and deaths.
4. Press Colombian authorities to prioritize the establishment of meaningful dialogues with protesters, at both the national and regional level, in order address this worrying cycle of protests and repression.