

Statement Submitted by
Colombian Senator María Fernanda Cabal

to the
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
In conjunction with the hearing

Protests in Colombia

July 1, 2021

If Colombia Falls, So Goes the Western Hemisphere

Conventional wisdom outside Colombia holds that the current wave of violence is a reaction to the tax reform proposal President Iván Duque presented in April. Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs)—including narcotraffickers and human smugglers—and their totalitarian and media partners have created this false narrative to disguise their violent attempt to overthrow the Colombian government.

A democratic, prosperous Colombia threatens the perpetrators' regional plan and their domination of neighboring countries. If they conquer Colombia, the entire hemisphere, including the United States, will lose security and liberty. If defenders of liberty understand the truth and unite with Colombia, we can stave off the threat.

Over the last two months, Colombia has been under ferocious attack by not only internal forces with ties to guerrilla groups and narcotrafficking; there have also been international actors participating who wish for our country to fall into the communist orbit of Cuba and Venezuela through organizations such as the Sao Paulo Forum and the Puebla Group. This operation is ongoing.

The first goal of this assault is to overthrow the Duque administration. The second is to weaken Colombia's democratic institutions and pave the way for the imposition of a Constitutional Assembly similar to Venezuela's in 1999 and Chile's recent one. The third is to hand over power to the political frontmen of the FARC and ELN guerrillas and of narcotraffickers.

This is not the first time Colombia has been the target of terrorist and narcotrafficking groups. From the mid-1980s through the 2000s, our country was on the verge of succumbing to the drug cartels. Plan Colombia, implemented in 1999 with the help of the US government, played a vital role in forcing narcoterrorists to back down.

The Insurrectionist Virus in Latin America

Today, the same enemies are launching a new offensive. They are converting past strategies oriented toward rural areas into ones that bring the conflict to the cities.

To achieve this end, they are using a tried-and-true method. It is the same one employed in Ecuador, when former president Lenín Moreno lifted gasoline subsidies; in Chile, when the Santiago subway ticket price increased; and in Colombia, initially just one year after Duque's election. The latest iteration continues even though Duque announced on May 2 that he would rescind the tax proposal.¹

These government policies became pretexts for the communist forces to unleash their previously planned assaults as if they were spontaneous protests. It is similar to what happened in the United States after the killing of George Floyd. Everything was ready, just waiting for a spark.

Venezuelan strongmen Nicolás Maduro and Diosdado Cabello do not hide their roles in these events across Latin America. On the contrary, they take pride in having conceived and supported them, nicknaming them the “Bolivarian breeze.”² Cabello has been explicit and publicly said he would take it upon himself to promote a war on Colombian soil. What we are facing is a war, not just because of the high rates of violence but also because of the economic toll on the nation.

Following waves of violent protests in Ecuador, Chile, and Bolivia, some Colombians took to the streets in November 2019 to oppose the Duque administration.³ Worker unions fronted these and cited potential reforms to labor, pension, and tax systems as their motivation. However, other groups joined the protests to demand tuition-free university and stricter adherence to the FARC peace agreement.⁴

These protests led to at least \$60 million in economic losses and damages to public infrastructure.⁵ Violent groups took advantage of the protests to raid the cities and attack businesses. After seven days of protests, the Colombian Police reported 172 detentions due to theft, route obstruction, violence against public servants, and damage to third-party property.⁶ The level of vandalism made clear this was not a spontaneous and peaceful protest but rather an organized and financed one.

In this context, Colombian security forces killed one leader of the ELN guerrillas in charge of urban militias.⁷ His nickname was Uriel, and in his computer police found detailed records of how

¹ Johana Lorduy, “El presidente Iván Duque anunció el retiro de la reforma tributaria en el Congreso,” accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.larepublica.co/economia/el-presidente-ivan-duque-anuncio-el-retiro-de-la-reforma-tributaria-en-el-congreso-3163195>

² Ludmila Vinogradoff, “Diosdado Cabello a menaza: La brisa bolivariana que recorre la región se convertirá en huracán,” last modified October 10, 2019, https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-diosdado-cabello-amenaza-brisa-bolivariana-recorre-region-convertira-huracan-201910201834_noticia.html

³ Semana, “¿Qué hay detrás del paro nacional del 21 de noviembre?,” accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/que-hay-detras-del-paro-del-21-de-noviembre-de-2019/640594/>

⁴ Daniel Pardo, “Paro nacional en Colombia: 3 factores inéditos que hicieron del 21 de noviembre un día histórico,” accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50520302>

⁵ Idem

⁶ CNN Español, “Siete días de protestas y sigue el paro nacional en Colombia: ¿cómo llegamos hasta aquí?,” accessed June 30, 2021, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/11/27/siete-dias-de-protestas-y-sigue-el-paro-nacional-en-colombia-como-llegamos-hasta-aqui/>

⁷ Jairo Tarazona, “Alias Uriel, cabecilla del ELN, reconoció que infiltraron protestas e incitaron a destruir los CAI,” last modified September 24, 2020, <https://www.lafm.com.co/colombia/alias-uriel-cabecilla-del-eln-reconocio-que-infiltraron-protestas-e-incitaron-destruir-los>

the ELN financed violent youth groups in Bogotá. Herbin Hoyos, a Colombian journalist, had already documented the operation of urban militias.⁸

Fake News Hits Legitimate Authorities

My team, with the help of forensic experts, proved that armed civilians carrying illegal weapons had participated in the police-station attacks. The strategy at the time, as it is now, was to completely overwhelm the authorities, whom they even threatened to burn alive inside their stations.⁹ Behind the protests there was more than met the eyes of unsuspecting observers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, this left-wing strategy subsided, and many planned opposition marches and blockades did not proceed. However, the virus outbreak only postponed the escalation of violence. On April 28, 2021, left-wing congressmen such as Gustavo Petro and Gustavo Bolivar called on their followers to take to the streets for allegedly peaceful protests. In just three days, over 7,000 bots operating from Russia and Bangladesh swarmed social media and amplified the leftist narrative.¹⁰

They distorted reality by creating hundreds of fake news stories to pit human-rights organizations against the Colombian police. By doing so, the agitators took a page out of the playbook of those against law-enforcement officers in Chile and the United States. We learned how vulnerable countries like Colombia are with respect to the manipulation of information on social media.

In this link you can access a detailed report in Spanish that we have submitted to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. It contains a comprehensive list of fake news stories (www.mariafernandacabal.com/informe-protestas) that distorted videos so that alleged police-brutality instances would trigger violence, which they did.¹¹ This proves the existence of a sophisticated communications campaign that spans social media and has managed, with international allies, to distort the narrative and turn reality upside down.

In the meantime, Colombian institutions—especially the police and anti-riot squad—face challenges that go beyond their operational capacity.

Honorable congressmen and congresswomen, it is no coincidence that the protests turned into violent blockades in the Valle del Cauca region. This is western Colombia's industrial and

⁸ “Nacimiento de Voces del Secuestro,” Caracol Radio, last modified February 24, 2021, <https://alacarta.caracol.com.co/audio/097RD130000001123174/>

⁹ Semana, “Así comenzó la balacera en el CAI Verbenal,” last modified September 17, 2020, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/asi-comenzo-la-balacera-en-el-cai-verbenal/202049/>

¹⁰ Semana, “Más de 7.000 troles animan el paro nacional en Twitter,” last modified May 21, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/mas-de-7000-troles-animan-el-paro-nacional-en-twitter/202130/>

¹¹ “Archivo Fake News,” María Fernanda Cabal, last modified May 14, 2021, http://mariafernandacabal.com/fake_news/

agricultural hub with sea access through one of the Pacific Ocean's main ports: Buenaventura. The violent factions planned to completely impede citizen mobility and the transportation of goods.

The vandals blocked ambulances and oxygen tanker trucks crucial for the care of patients hospitalized due to COVID-19, and right at the pandemic's peak. Consider just two victims of many terrifying cases that have occurred during the blockades against medical personnel. Two children, a newborn boy and a girl, died inside ambulances transporting them to receive urgent medical care. They were unable to arrive at their destinations because they were blocked by violent protesters without any moral limits.¹²

Furthermore, the vandals shut down 90 percent of Cali's public transport¹³ and destroyed food-supply chains and the industry's most important businesses. A primary victim was the poultry industry,¹⁴ which is the main source of protein for Colombia's poor. These actions generated shortages in Colombia and triggered a price hike that worsened the country's poverty and unemployment.¹⁵ Amid the chaos of the violent protests, authorities seized US\$270,000 in cash originating from northern Cauca, coca-leaf regions where FARC and Mexican drug cartels operate.

According to the Finance Ministry, daily losses from the so-called national strike in 2021, now in its second month, have risen to US\$130 million. Total losses in this period amount to US\$2.9 billion.¹⁶

Agitators have distorted the number of deceased during the protests to exaggerate and vilify the police response. The opposition and the extreme left presented many deaths as instances of police brutality, but many of them did not even occur during the protests or related events. Others have been the victims of hitmen who seized the opportunity to commit murders during the chaos.

¹² Semana, "La dolorosa historia de una madre embarazada que perdió a su bebé por quedar atrapada en un bloqueo," last modified May 4, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/manifestantes-en-cundinamarca-ta-caron-una-ambulancia-que-transportaba-mujer-en-parto-prematuro-el-recien-nacido-fallecio/202145/>

BLU Radio y EFE, "Bebé intubada murió porque no dejaron pasar ambulancia en bloqueo entre Buenaventura y Cali," last modified May 23, 2021, <https://www.bluradio.com/blu360/pacifico/video-bebe-intubada-murio-porque-no-dejaron-pasar-ambulancia-en-bloqueo-entre-buenaventura-y-cali>

¹³ Semana, "Cali: arreglar los daños del MIO vandalizado durante protestas cuesta \$55 mil millones," last modified June 23, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/cali-arreglar-los-danos-del-mio-vandalizado-durante-protestas-cuesta-55-mil-millones/202120/>

¹⁴ Lina Vargas Vega, "Pollos mueren de hambre en granjas porque el alimento no se transporta," last modified May 12, 2021, <https://www.larepublica.co/especiales/negocios-entre-la-pandemia-y-el-vandalismo/pollos-mueren-de-hambre-en-la-s-granjas-porque-su-alimento-no-se-puede-transportar-3168661>

¹⁵ Semana, "El paro nacional llevó la inflación de alimentos y regulados a máximos en cinco años," last modified June 8, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/economia/macroeconomia/articulo/el-paro-nacional-llevo-la-inflacion-de-alimentos-y-regulados-a-maximos-en-cinco-anos/202153/>

¹⁶ Portafolio, "Economía ha perdido \$10,8 billones en un mes de paro," last modified May 27, 2021, <https://www.portafolio.co/economia/por-manifestaciones-en-colombia-ha-perdido-10-8-billones-en-un-mes-de-paro-552386>

Honorable congressmen and congresswomen, the truth is the real victims of the protests have been the Colombian police and some civilians.¹⁷

A Nation under Siege by Narcos

This level of violence and planning means we should dismiss the notion that this has been a spontaneous social outburst. It is true the 2021 protests began after the introduction of a fiscal reform to gather US\$6.5 million to alleviate poverty and unemployment. However, the response was far from peaceful protesting. Colombia is under siege by an organized guerrilla movement the likes of which we lived through before the arrival of Álvaro Uribe to the presidency (2002–2010).

Now the guerrillas have taken to some cities and portrayed themselves and allies as peaceful protesters. We have shown they are violent, financed by narcotrafficking, and run from abroad.

We reiterate that Colombia is under siege. We have as our neighbor the regime of Nicolás Maduro protecting so-called dissident-FARC terrorists. They continue to fight criminal groups and the ELN guerrillas for control over the drug-trafficking corridors.

The ELN and the FARC reincarnation are allied with the Bolivarian National Guard and the Venezuelan Army. In addition, Russian mercenaries are in Venezuelan territory, and Colombia is facing an immigration crisis from Venezuela without precedent in the region. Some of those migrants have been weaponized, and intelligence sources have revealed the presence of Chavista *colectivos*. As if that were not enough, this destabilization strategy has also weaponized indigenous peoples, who have invaded private property and destroyed vehicles.¹⁸

According to a Defense Ministry report,¹⁹ since April 28, 2021, there have been 7,334 gatherings, 2,464 marches, and 3,541 illegal blockades that have left 1,454 police officers wounded—1,392 male and 62 female. Six officers are still in the hospital to this day.

¹⁷ Semana, “Aterrador: tres disparos de arma de fuego, 30 puñaladas y quemaduras con ácido: el reporte forense de patrullero asesinado en Cali,” last modified June 18, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/aterador-tres-disparos-de-arma-de-fuego-30-punaladas-y-quemaduras-con-acido-el-reporte-forense-de-patrullero-asesinado-en-cali/202155/>

¹⁸ El Tiempo, “Hombre denuncia que indígenas atacaron condominio en Cali,” last modified May 10, 2021, <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/cali/cali-hombre-denuncia-que-indigenas-entraron-a-condominio-a-causar-danos-587238>

¹⁹ Balance General del Paro Nacional 2021, Noticias, María Fernanda Cabal, last modified June 29, 2021, <http://mariafernacabal.com/balance-general-del-paro-nacional-2021/>

Urban terrorists have kidnapped 13 police officers from the Valle del Cauca region. Their violence amid the national strike has included the murder of two police officers, one in Cali²⁰ by gunshot and another one in Soacha,²¹ near Bogotá, from a sharp wound.

It is impossible for organized groups to remain on the streets for more than 50 days without large-scale financing. This has allowed them to purchase clothing and weapons such as guns, bombs, Molotov cocktails, acids, and other devices to attack law enforcement. These actions against law enforcement require funding, trained individuals, and a hierarchical structure. They could not have appeared spontaneously as a byproduct of a protest against a fiscal reform.

I must remind you of what former president Juan Manuel Santos's administration did in 2015. Due to FARC pressure, he suspended the glyphosate aerial fumigation that was effectively eradicating the terrorists' hundreds of thousands of hectares of coca.

In 2015 in Colombia, according to the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, there were 159,000 hectares of coca. Then it went to 188,000 in 2016; 209,000 in 2017; 208,000 in 2018; and 212,000 in 2019. In 2020 we reached the record number: 245,000 hectares for the production of 1,010 metric tons of cocaine.²²

The key to understanding what is happening in Colombia is narcotrafficking. Let us not forget that Maduro, according to US authorities, is the leader of the Soles drug cartel. This is the region's most powerful drug cartel because it has the support of the Venezuelan state. Narcotraffickers intend to unify their operations to control a vast territory spanning the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, which means taking over our country.

It gets worse. Colombia is a key land route for contraband and irregular migration. Currently, TCOs send their products by air and sea from Venezuela to Honduras and Guatemala. With control of Colombia, the illicit flows by land would increase significantly. If Colombia falls into the hands of TCOs, it will undermine the entire region's national security.

Colombia is a prisoner of a mafia and is under siege by urban-guerrilla militias shielding themselves behind a faux social protest. I hope this document assists the US Congress with corroborating the verifiable facts of the difficult situation Colombia is going through. The media have not presented the situation correctly, and the international community cannot keep observing through the myopic lenses of fake news.

²⁰ Radio Nacional de Colombia, "Cali: un policía muerto y dos más heridos tras enfrentamientos," last modified May 21, 2021, <https://www.radionacional.co/actualidad/cali-un-policia-muerto-y-dos-mas-heridos-enfrentamientos-calipso>

²¹ Semana, "Falleció el director de la Sijín de Soacha, que fue apuñalado por vándalos durante el paro nacional," last modified April 30, 2021, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/fallecio-el-director-de-la-sijin-de-soacha-que-fue-a-punalado-por-vandalos-durante-el-paro-nacional/202139/>

²² Sergio Gómez Maseri, "EE. UU. registra importante aumento de cultivos de coca en Colombia," last modified June 25, 2021, <https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/eeuu-y-canada/crecen-cultivos-ilicitos-en-colombia-598790>