

UN Reports 41 Activists Murdered in Colombia So Far This Year



United Nations, May 5 (RHC)-- The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has raised alarm over the fact that at least 41 activists have been killed in Colombia so far this year. The report says the figure lays bare a troubling continuation of violence despite a historic agreement between the government and the country's largest rebel army last year.

U.N. commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein said the figure shows a worsening trend of crimes against social leaders and human rights defenders. He noted that this "is an increase over the same period last year and previous years, and is very alarming."

In comparison, in all of 2016, a total of 80 human rights defenders lost their lives, including community leaders, organizers and lawyers defending Indigenous people, campesinos, Afro-Colombians, labor activists, victims' groups, youth and LGBTI community members, according to the program We Are Defenders.

According to the UN official, the attacks appear to be concentrated in areas that the FARC previously controlled during the armed conflict and recently abandoned in order to demobilize after the signing of the

peace agreement.

Hussein said the peace process in Colombia "advances, although slowly, but it advances." The official said that if the tendency to assassinate human rights defenders in Colombia continues it "could harm the enormous efforts made in this peace process."

Human rights organizations and leaders of the FARC have repeatedly warned that violence waged by right-wing paramilitaries, which they hold responsible for the surge in violence against social leaders, poses the greatest threat to the fledgling and fragile peace agreement.

Hussein urged everyone in Colombia to "stay vigilant," noting that in post-conflict situations it's common to see that while the number of deaths caused by armed violence reduces, there's an increase in human rights violations. "We have to be very careful that this does not happen in Colombia," he said.

Social movements and human rights activists have been calling on Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos to do more to address paramilitary violence targeting social and left-wing leaders.

According to official statistics, a staggering 156 social leaders were killed in Colombia in the 14 months between Jan. 1, 2016 and March 1, 2017. Amid the crisis, rights groups have urged the Colombian government to prioritize tackling paramilitary violence that often targets progressive social leaders including campesinos, Indigenous activists and other human rights defenders.

According to the U.S. State Department, paramilitary forces are responsible for up to 80 percent of the human rights abuses committed in Colombia's 52-year civil war that has claimed the lives of some 260,000 people and victimized millions more.

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