

Colombians call for end to impunity as activist killings continue

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Bogota, July 17 (RHC)-- Dora Muñoz's life was irreparably changed on March 14th. That night, she received news nobody wants to hear: her husband, Miller Correa, had been found dead. His lifeless body was discovered strewn alongside a road near the small rural community of Las Chozas, on the outskirts of the southeastern Colombian city of Popayan.

Correa was a prominent social leader and Indigenous rights defender who worked throughout the turbulent department of Cauca, which has seen a recent uptick in violence between armed groups battling for control of territory, resources and key drug routes.

Due to his position as a social leader and his political activism, the state had appointed a personal security detail to Correa. But that night in March, the 40-year-old attended a meeting without his security

team, and upon leaving, he was attacked by armed men, according to his wife and local media. Two days later, the armed group Aguilas Negras – or Black Eagles – took credit for the killing.

“It’s been very, very difficult for me,” Muñoz told Al Jazeera in a recent interview. “It’s something that one never quite understands, even living through it. It’s incomprehensible, you can’t find any valid justification for such an act.”

Correa’s family is not alone, as the past few years have been marked by a surge in killings of social leaders in Colombia. So far in 2022, at least 101 people have been killed, according to the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz).

“Social leaders tend to be the people who stand up for their communities, so they put themselves in a very difficult situation because of their leadership,” Sergio Guzman, a political analyst and director of the Colombia Risk Analysis consultancy group, told Al Jazeera. “They are targeted by illegal organisations [in order] to assert their total control, instil fear in the population and subdue them.”

Indepaz says 1,328 social leaders – a term used to describe political activists, community representatives and rights defenders – have been killed since the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group.

Last year alone, Indepaz registered 171 killings of social leaders, while the Colombian Ombudsman’s Office recorded 145. Experts say the violence is linked to a variety of factors, including armed groups vying for control, power vacuums generated by the failed implementation of the peace agreement, and a near-total absence of the state in some parts of the country.

Control of much of Colombia’s rural areas is still being disputed by several armed groups, predominantly the Gulf Clan cartel, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and FARC dissidents who rejected the peace deal and remain engaged in the armed conflict.

“The majority of social leaders have been killed by different types of armed groups,” said Juan Pappier, senior Americas researcher at Human Rights Watch. “In some parts [of the country], it has to do with fighting among the different groups and accusations that the social leaders are working for the opposing party,” Pappier told Al Jazeera.

“In other areas of Colombia, they are being killed because they support plans to replace cocaine crops with food – which obviously would potentially damage the illegal economy of these same groups – or because they support plans to recover land stolen during the armed conflict.”

In Cauca, where Correa was killed in March, much of the violence comes in response to the organised resistance mounted by local Indigenous groups in defence of their territories.

The Indigenous movement has “been clear in its rejection and denunciation [of armed groups], its request for peace, and the control of territory we believe is ours”, Mauricio Capaz, a Nasa Indigenous leader and member of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, told Al Jazeera. “In response we have been met with a high level of violence.”

Both Pappier and Guzman said the Colombian government has been largely absent in many rural areas such as Cauca, and has done little to address the violence despite calls for action and accountability.

The Colombian government allocated just over \$1 million this year to the National Protection Unit (UNP), a branch of the Interior Ministry charged with protecting those at risk. The unit was established in 2011 and is currently protecting 3,749 social leaders across the country, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Following the recent release of its final report on the armed conflict, Colombia's Truth Commission urged the government to provide more protection to political activists and address issues of state violence and negligence.

"It's mostly a problem of the authorities not understanding the situation," said Pappier. "The government believes that the way of addressing this is by increasing the budget of the National Protection Unit and granting human rights defenders bulletproof vests and bodyguards. "But the security problem in Colombia cannot be solved through bulletproof vests."

For the incoming government of left-wing president-elect Gustavo Petro, who will take office next month, such violence is going to be a considerable and likely recurring challenge, the experts said.

Petro has promised to open negotiations with the ELN – which did not lay down arms following the 2016 peace agreement – in order to quell the violence and work towards a more efficient implementation of the deal.

Petro recently said that "the time for peace has come" and pledged to establish contact with "all existing armed groups" in the country. "What I request is a ceasefire that will be bilateral," he said, adding that his administration would work to "bring an end to the war in Colombia".

However, Guzman questioned whether anything would really change. "The factors that foster violence against social leaders will continue – drug trafficking will continue to be a tremendously lucrative business, there will continue to be a huge state absence, and the judicial system is slow," he said. "No matter Petro's political will, the reality is that it is very unlikely that he will be able to confront it vehemently."

In the meantime, Dora Muñoz said she hopes for some degree of closure and justice for her husband. "It is urgent to put an end to impunity and that justice is done, because it is a way to alleviate so much pain," she told Al Jazeera.

"It is not going to revive the dead, but it is going to help us cope with these difficult situations."

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