

Murders of Community Leaders Jeopardize Peace Agreement

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On January 20, the lifeless body of Hernan E. Agamez Florez lay in a street in Montelíbano, a town in northern Colombia. Hernan was a political and social activist: a member of the Campesino Association of Sur de Córdoba, member of the Coca Growers Committee, treasurer of the Collective Action Council of El Barro *vereda*, and leader of the Patriotic March movement. Hernan's death unites him with those of other community leaders in recent years.

A report published by the Institute of Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz) estimated that of the 117 community leaders and human rights activists murdered in Colombia in 2016, at least 21 were members of Patriotic March, and 52 were members or leaders of indigenous or campesino groups. And although smaller in number, the killings of Afro-Colombians, members of the LGBT community, those asking for the return of seized land, lawyers protecting property rights, and journalists cannot be ignored.

The majority of homicides have been concentrated in western Colombia, predominantly in the departments of Cauca (43), Antioquia (15) and Nariño (9). The circumstances surrounding the murders are hair-raising. The majority are carried out with firearms--with gunshots to the head--while in other cases, the perpetrators have used crude weapons like machetes. There have also been barbarous instances of torture, rape and decapitation.

The left-wing Patriotic March started to report the killings of its members in 2012, with more than 128 killed since then. The movement accuses armed elements of the extreme right of carrying out an organized extermination campaign. One of the Patriotic March's concerns is that the current wave of killings repeats the genocide carried out by the Colombian self-defense group AUC against left-wing leaders in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, it is estimated that 5,000 members of the Patriotic Union political party were killed.

For its part, the government of Juan Manuel Santos has claimed on multiple occasions that the killers belong to local gangs, and not to paramilitary groups. However, the Indepaz report shows that the majority of cases have not been solved. Of the 117 homicides listed in the report, 84 cases are unsolved, and 27 have been attributed to paramilitary groups like the Gulf Clan (formerly known as the Urabeños) and the Black Eagles. In the six remaining cases, the perpetrators were members of the army or police. However, on January 24,

Interior Minister Juan Fernando Cristo stated that the number of homicides topped 64, rather than the 117 Indepaz had indicated. He also said that while the number was smaller, it was still a worrying issue. The list of 64 killings has not yet been published, so it is impossible to determine which of the killings were left off the shorter list and why.

The United Nations has expressed its concern about the destabilizing impact these killings could have on the recently signed peace agreement that the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are striving to implement. One of the points included in the accord was the establishment of “guaranteeing security and combating criminal organizations responsible for murdering and massacring advocates for human rights and social and political movements.” The peace agreement was signed on September 27, 2016, and there were 32 killings between that date and the end of the year. The Interior Minister himself has signaled that the killings could represent a threat to the new peace agreement. At the same time, many Colombians are asking if the peace agreement with the FARC doesn’t mean that paramilitary groups will occupy the lands where the left-wing guerrillas once dominated. There are doubts about the possibility for lasting peace.

Finally, it is important to note that Indepaz’s list only includes those who have been murdered and does not include the 350 individuals and groups that have been threatened, nor the 50 people who have been attacked or the 5 people who have been abducted and disappeared. It is also important to note that the lives of community leaders and human rights activists are not the only ones at risk. Other forms of repression include attacks against the relatives and loved ones of members of these movements. And if these were included, the list would be much longer. The Colombian government must advance urgently with the investigations. Though it may be difficult at this moment to link all of the killings to paramilitary activity, the government must provide the necessary resources for the investigation of every case, find those who are responsible, and strike at the current impunity that comes from anonymity.

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