



Senseless Murders of Human Rights Activists in Colombia:

An Interview with the NGO, *Somos Defensores*

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This interview was originally conducted in Spanish, and translated by the author.

Earlier this year, [COHA wrote](#) about the ongoing, violent targeting of social leaders and human rights activists in Colombia whose mission has angered many military groups. These groups have used systematic coercive means to undermine activists' work or otherwise silence them without mercy. The rate at which these attacks have occurred has not decreased; quite to the contrary, according to the *Somos Defensores*, an NGO based in Colombia. In fact, the numbers have significantly increased since the final peace deal was signed between the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the government, which was formally initiated on November 11, 2016. Nevertheless, Between January and March of 2017, 20 counts of murder, 19 attempted murders, and a staggering 136 threats were accounted for, representing respectively a 1, 14, and 55 increase in real numbers compared to the same period (January to March) in 2016.ⁱ The FARC once ruled over extensive parts of Colombian territory, creating a power vacuum when they withdrew from many of these contested lands. This new reality generated a propitious environment for unresolved quarrels, bitter vendettas, and other power struggles to be played out in the open. Most of the murders have taken place in the most remote, rural parts of the country which had been FARC strongholds which in part relied on cocaine production to fund some of their operations.

The conflict between the FARC and the central government arose after the end of a decade-long bloody civil war in 1964. The influence of Marxist ideology in calling for equitable land distribution in opposition to a harsh regime of unrestricted private property and the lack of effective oversight by the central government in the more remote areas of the country led to a standoff between the two ideologically adversaries which lasted for over 53 years.ⁱⁱ Several attempts at détente failed; left wing political parties looking to integrate traditional politics such as the *Union Patriótica*, co-funded in the eighties by the FARC and the Communist Party, had some 6,000 of its members, including a presidential candidate, persecuted and killed.ⁱⁱⁱ The perpetrators of such

crimes, were a nebulous grouping composed of para-military right wing ideologues as well as more traditional center right government officials who shared the common goal of eradicating communism.

After many fluctuating periods of heightened tension and damaging military campaigns, the election of the now moderate President Santos in 2010 opened a rare window of opportunity for backdoor negotiations between the recently elected administration and FARC leaders to reach a peace agreement; these were later made public by the press. The initial peace agreement was subjected to a referendum in order to seek majority consent, which was narrowly rejected on October 3, 2016.^{iv} The final agreement was officially ratified (with some amendments) on November 24, 2016.^v

The eventual treaty assured that both parties would bring the conflict to an end, offering the possibility for guerilla soldiers to re-insert themselves into Colombian society with the aid of government programs and a degree of legal immunity for past crimes.^{vi} The treaty certified the government's goodwill and its obligation to "combat against organized crime responsible for the murders and massacres, or who otherwise threaten the lives of human rights activists, social movements, or other political movements."^{vii} A new Agrarian Reform Law, enacted as part of the peace process, has proven controversial and has been an important factor in the ensuing violence. The reforms have at their core the desire to effectively redistribute land to displaced landowners whose properties had been seized at one time or another by both the guerilla and paramilitary groups alike, which has been made that much more challenging when trying to settle land disputes intermingled with unresolved historical local conflicts.

Somos Defensores is an NGO working for the protection of human rights activists in Colombia. In 2006, it created a system of classifying aggressions directed towards human rights activists called System of Information on Aggressions Against Human Right Activists in Colombia (*Sistema de Información Sobre Agresiones Contra Defensores de Derechos Humanos en Colombia*) and issues reports on current events affecting these workers. It also produces a detailed list of the names of activists who have been murdered as well as detecting incidences of aggressions.

The following interview was conducted with Carlos J. Guevara in charge of press relations at *Somos Defensores*, in which we discussed the violence inflicted upon social leaders as well as the peace process itself. This interview was conducted on May 16, 2017 via Skype.

Why are human rights activists being targeted?

Human right activists were the only ones who believed in the possibility of ending the conflict through negotiations and political means, lobbying and helping the current process along; as a result, they are being targeted today in Colombia by rightist groups who did not want to see the conflict end for economic, ideological, and personal reasons.

You published a report last March on these aggressions. What does the data show? How do you compile them?

We have noticed a considerable hike in attempted murders as well as threats against those we seek to protect. We have registered one more murder than was the case for last year's total. The end of 2016 also witnessed a significant increase in murder cases as the peace negotiation was coming to an end. There are many different set of numbers that can be found on the internet regarding aggressions and murders. We try to make them as fair as possible; the identification of these murders is a crucial aspect of our work. However, we make sure that all our data is verified and take our work very seriously, unlike other organizations who might publish numbers without a thorough background investigation. We have more than 16 years of experience in this field and choose to publish conservative numbers, perhaps even less extreme to the 'real' numbers, but we only publish confirmed cases. Despite our strict requirements, and without any doubt, there has been an increase in violence.

The Colombian peace agreements have helped to set up a follow-up commission to uphold the rights of social leaders and activists alike, settle conflicts, as well as restore the rule of law in rural areas of the nation. However, according to your report, it seems to not be delivering on some of its promises. Can you give us your perspective on the issue?

The commission is now taking its first baby steps. Therefore, we cannot say that the government has not been able to comply with the agreements it has entered into. Due to the extremely violent context, it is, however, disturbing that the commission is this inexperienced. The government has done a lot, and of course it could do more, but our country has many bureaucratic hurdles which will slow down the peace process. Additionally, there is a well-organized, and substantial, political opposition, even within the current administration of President Santos, that is not willing to accept this peace agreement in its entirety. For example, last week, when the National Congress for Peace was about to close, they invited the FARC representatives to participate, but they were denied access. This sent a very strong political message. The senators who refused them access are not confined to one political party, but can be found spread out in the center-right political spectrum.

Do you believe that corruption may have disrupted the smooth implementation of government programs which were intended to consolidate efforts at peacemaking?

The policies that were and are still being formulated by the central government, are done so transparently; I truly believe there is a sincere effort to ensure a lasting peace. We notice this when we work directly with the government. If corruption exists, it is minimal. However, many regions are immensely corrupt. In areas where local groups have, for decades, monopolized power, as they thrive off the war using

and abusing public funds, there will be a hindrance when the central government must accept the findings of international missions and other organizations. Other organizations like our own, try to bring peace to bring high visibility to peace efforts to bring some tranquility volatile sectors. Territorializing peace is going to be difficult.

To resolve this issue, actions must be taken by the government to dismantle economic structures that help finance these groups.

Speaking of finance, is there sufficient money being allocated to these programs?

The financing of these projects is of utmost importance. The funds are going to be taken from the Colombians' taxpayers, but as you know, in politics everything can change from one administration to the other. Based on this uncertainty, we could argue that the second biggest challenge to peace in Colombia lies in the outcome of the 2018 elections, as to whether the next administration will be willing to invest the same amount of time and funds for peace.

The Minister of Post-Conflict Resolution Rafael Prado stated, “The main threat to peace in Colombia is coca.”^{viii} Do you agree with this statement?

No. It is a conflictive issue as well as a complex one, for sure, but I believe the greatest threat to the sustainability of peace in this country is criminal impunity, and I will tell you why. If there continues to be heinous breaches regarding human rights, abuses of activists or any other section of the population for that matter, as long as there is a broken judicial system, as long as the people at the forefront of these acts of violence are not sent to prison, this will send a message to drug traffickers and other perpetrators of violence that their actions do not have consequences. If this keeps on happening, we will be confronted with a normalization of violence, we will witness the restructuring of FARC dissidents, and we will see the strengthening of paramilitary groups, especially in rural areas where the hand of justice has little to no reach. This has always been the underlying problem in Colombia. The justice system simply does not work, and if nothing is done to fix this problem, peace will not prevail. Cocaine production is only but a factor in this wider conundrum. By the way, Colombia has ceased to be the main producer of cocaine worldwide; nowadays Peru holds that title.

The reason for Prado's comment is simple: there has been an increase in internal consumption of cocaine, in part attributable to lower exporting levels due the destruction of transportation routes. Drug traffickers have sought to fill this void by creating an internal demand. This in turn has become a critical focus for the current government, pushing for this issue to be at the forefront of national politics. Cocaine has been an important agenda item over the years in terms of generating revenue for all actors involved in the civil war, but let us not forget that this conflict was first and foremost political in nature.

Finally, what do you believe is the path forward for a peaceful Colombia at this stage? What message do you have for our readers?

I think the message is very clear: the key to peace in Colombia resides in the work of human right activists. The men and women who have worked all their lives to resolve the conflict through political means, these are the people who have worked for equality, for equity, and to guarantee basic rights for all. In this decisive moment in the country's history, they are being assassinated, they are being massacred, and they are being persecuted. These activists need to be protected so they can keep on fighting for democracy and for peace in this country. If you want to help us with this endeavor, support human rights activists' demands. Listen to them, receive them, and allow their messages to be heard outside the confines of Colombia.

In conclusion, the peace agreement reached by the Santos administration is no small feat. It has ended the longest lasting civil war in the Western hemisphere,^{ix} and as a result dramatically helped lower the murder rate in Colombia.^x However, as this article, with the help of Mr. Guevara, has demonstrated, peace remains very fragile in the country. The facts that the targeting of human rights is on the rise, political opposition to the initial deal is still strong, and the prospect of a future election, all threaten what has been achieved. Additionally, another admittedly smaller guerilla faction like the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) is still active as the current government tries to strike a peace deal.^{xi} The international community needs to provide support for this endeavour as it will undoubtedly affect the rest of the region and in particular the United States, which has had close ties with Colombia as well as important trade ties, not always legal in nature. The Trump administration, had signed a substantial financial aid package, of approximately 10 billion dollars, to ensure peace and promote future economic development,^{xii} however despite the huge sum proposed, the Trump administration has flip-flopped and recently showed interest in cutting this budget down by 36 percent.^{xiii} Altogether these factors dramatically undermine the possibility of long-lasting peace.

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