

Embracing Truth: Killings of Social Leaders

"How is it possible that 4,757 social leaders have been murdered in Colombia in the last 30 years?" asked Francisco de Roux, President of Colombia's Truth Commission, to an audience of human rights defenders from different departments, regional authorities, national government officials, delegates from international agencies and members of civil society.

And so began the Truth Commission's first Dialogue for Non-Repetition on 11 June 2019, 'Long live social leaders and human rights defenders', to address the killings of social leaders across Colombia.

These dialogues form part of the Truth Commission's strategy to create spaces for in-depth discussion about some of the most difficult and complex questions regarding the causes and consequences of Colombia's armed conflict.

This innovative approach is intended to encourage society to reflect on the violence suffered by those who defend peace in their territories. The dialogue was streamed online and shown in all 19 of the regional 'casas de la verdad' across Colombia.

What does Colombia lose every time a social leader is killed?

Since the signing of the peace agreement in November 2016, over 600 social leaders have been murdered in Colombia. This trend has been described by commentators as a deliberate attempt to weaken the social fabric.

As part of the dialogue, the names of 162 murdered social leaders were written in fractured glass in the Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá. This symbolic act, 'Quebrantos', designed by the artist Doris Salcedo, who sits on the advisory board of the Truth Commission, seeks to pay tribute to the victims.



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Rebuilding trust

The dialogue sought to find answers to: why are social leaders being murdered in their territories? What should the State do differently so that this trend doesn't continue? What should Colombia do as a society to overcome this situation? What is the impact on democracy, participation and community development when social leaders are threatened and killed?

For nearly three hours the 12 participants discussed the causes and consequences of the killings of social leaders. Among those present were Fernando Carrillo, Inspector General; Ricardo Arias, Vice Minister of the Interior; Alberto Brunori, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, and; Camilo Romero, Governor of Nariño, among other senior officials.

The participants agreed that there are several explanations for the violence. To mention a few: land disputes for megaprojects, illegal mining and coca farming - where the activists and leaders defending those land rights are often seen as a threat to economic interests; disputes over biodiversity and the environment; and, when social leaders are seen to challenge the power and authority of the state.

"Here in Colombia we have a political model of exclusion, which does not allow for difference, opposition, alternative thinking," said Marylen Serna, Agrarian Summit leader.

In terms of solutions, that state ought to officially recognise the authority of social leaders, said Leyner Palacios, representative of victims in Chocó, "don't think of us only for dance and entertainment". Other proposed solutions include sincere dialogues with the government, reengineering the National Protection Unit (UNP) - the entity responsible for providing security to social leaders - and strengthening the indigenous and rural guards.

The participants also discussed the need for Duque's government to implement the Peace Agreement, particularly the crop substitution programme and comprehensive rural reform, to guarantee the safety of social leaders. Inspector General Carrillo, acknowledged that in Colombia social leaders are being systematically murdered and commented on the urgent need for the state to act.

To close the dialogue, Francisco de Roux thanked the participants for their attendance and urged those present to continue the dialogue in the territories.



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#26JMiGritoEs: Stop the killing of social leaders in Colombia

On 26 July 2019, ReD UK joined activists across the world in a global day of solidarity with the Colombian peace process.

In Bogotá, Francisco de Roux formally invited Colombians to take to the streets to march in defence of peace and to demand an end to the killings of social leaders. He marched alongside representatives of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition including President of the JEP, Patricia Linares.

In London, campaigners gathered outside the BBC headquarters to highlight the lack of media attention given to Colombia's human rights crisis, holding images of murdered social leaders and a 30-meter banner bearing the names of more than 600 victims. They then marched through iconic London landmarks including Regent Street, Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square and 10 Downing Street, shouting "stop the killing of social leaders in Colombia... stop, stop, stop!"

The march ended with a rally outside the Houses of Parliament, where campaigners demanded full implementation of the peace agreement and an end to violence against social activists and FARC guerrillas.



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