



## Press Release

# IACHR Condemns Murders of Human Rights Defenders and Social Leaders in Colombia

July 19, 2018

Washington, D.C. - The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) condemns the murders of human rights defenders and social leaders in Colombia and expresses its concern over such violence. The IACHR stresses its call on the Colombian State to take urgent measures to protect human rights defenders in the country, and to diligently investigate cases bearing in mind victims' activities in defense of human rights.

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Based on the data recorded by the civil society program Somos Defensores (We Are Defenders), run by the Information System on Attacks against Human Rights Defenders in Colombia, 46 human rights defenders were murdered in the country during the first quarter of 2018—double the number of such cases in the first quarter of 2017, that is. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia said that, between January and June this year, there had been at least 90 such murders. The departments worst affected by this violence are, according to the country's Ombudsman, Cauca, Antioquia, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Valle del Cauca and Chocó.

In March, the Commission [expressed its concern](#) over the fact that many of the murdered defenders were working in the implementation of the Peace Agreement. In that sense, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia recently warned of the damage that this situation is causing to the peace process and to Colombian democracy. The Commission stresses that these murders happen in a broader context of violence faced by defenders within the country. Based on civil society records, in the first quarter of the year, 132 human rights defenders were victims of some form of attack that put their lives or personal integrity at risk. Human rights defenders are also being subjected to smear campaigns that promote hatred on social media, and to other forms of persecution that include being followed, suffering illegal tapping of their communications and having their information stolen.

Acts of violence against human rights defenders not only affect the guarantees they are due as human beings. They also impact the fundamental role those defenders play in society, instill fear, and generally discourage the efforts of human rights defenders. Such attacks also harm the people for whom defenders work, increasing their vulnerability and leaving them defenseless. "The efforts of human rights defenders in Colombia are crucial for the construction of a democratic society," said Commissioner Francisco Eguiguren, the IACHR's Rapporteur for Colombia and for Human Rights Defenders. "The Colombian State must ensure a safe environment where defenders can freely exercise their right to defend rights."

"Protecting defenders is especially important in a context like Colombia's, where a peace agreement is being implemented to end a conflict that lasted decades," said the IACHR's Executive Secretary Paulo Abrão.

The Commission stresses that the State needs to take urgent action to investigate acts of violence against defenders and to punish their perpetrators and masterminds, as well as to prevent smear campaigns and attacks against them. That must include the development of lines of investigation that consider the hypothesis that the violence may have been linked to the victim's efforts to defend human rights. Such investigations must also be carried out with due diligence, in a thorough, serious and impartial way. The Commission urges the State to increase its efforts to confront the situation of impunity with respect to crimes committed against human rights defenders in the country.

"The State must bear in mind the specific risk factors faced by particularly vulnerable groups of human rights defenders, including women, members of indigenous communities, Afro-descendant persons and residents of rural areas," said IACHR President Margarette May Macaulay, Rapporteur on the Rights of Women and of Afro-descendants and against Racial Discrimination. "In particular, the State must adopt a differentiated approach to the investigation, prosecution, punishment and reparation of such crimes, including gender and ethnic-racial perspectives." The Commission further urges the State to design and implement prevention strategies and protection measures that are comprehensive, culturally appropriate and specialized, in order to guarantee that defenders can carry out their tasks in a context of equality and non-discrimination, free from all forms of violence.

A principal, autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS), the IACHR derives its mandate from the OAS Charter and the American Convention on Human Rights. The Inter-American Commission has a mandate to promote respect for and to defend human

rights in the region and acts as a consultative body to the OAS in this area. The Commission is composed of seven independent members who are elected in an individual capacity by the OAS General Assembly and who do not represent their countries of origin or residence.

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