



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Peace and Victims' Rights in Colombia

July 19, 2018

10:00 – 12:00 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join my colleague and co-chair Randy Hultgren in welcoming you to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on peace and victims' rights in Colombia.

I extend a special welcome to our witnesses, three of whom have traveled from Colombia and another from Notre Dame, to be with us today.

I also want to recognize the Latin America Working Group, Oxfam America and the Washington Office on Latin America for their unceasing efforts to support human rights, peace and democracy in Colombia and elsewhere in the Americas.

In November 2016, after four long years of negotiations, the Colombian government signed a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC.

It is a comprehensive accord that goes far beyond the demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of former guerrilla fighters. There are sections on rural reform, political participation, ending the illicit drug economy, dismantling paramilitary organizations and fulfilling victims' rights.

It's an accord that recognizes that peace is more than the cessation of hostilities – that putting down arms is the first step, not the last. That constructing peace requires dealing with the root causes of a conflict that lasted over 50 years.

Importantly, it is also an accord that placed the suffering and rights of victims at the center of the agreement.

Today, we're here to look at the implementation of the peace accord – the process of translating what's on paper into practice. We're doing this now for a couple of reasons.

First, a new government is about to come into power. Ivan Duque, elected in June, will take the oath of office on August 7. So it's a good time to take stock.

But second, we're worried.

There has been a lot of pushback against the accord from important sectors of Colombian society. You may know that a referendum called on the first version of the peace accord was voted down, and there are ongoing efforts in the Colombian congress to change some key negotiated provisions.

Meanwhile, after dropping for a few years, coca production has increased dramatically in Colombia. Whatever the reasons, this matters because for far too many people in the U.S. government, the main concern about Colombia is controlling the flow of drugs into the United States. Increased coca production puts bipartisan support for peace in Colombia at risk.

And last but not least, we're here because people are still being killed. Social leaders, human rights defenders and demobilized guerrillas are being assassinated left and right – as many as 311 since January 2016, according to the human rights ombudsman's office.

There is fear that we've been here before.

Colombia has been wracked by internal armed conflict for most of its history. The current peace process with the FARC is the latest of many such accords, over many years, with many different insurgent groups.

Three decades ago, in the period before and after the peace negotiations that led to Colombia's landmark 1991 Constitution, there was a massive wave of assassinations: hundreds of people, perhaps thousands, including elected leaders, were brutally killed in a terror campaign to exterminate the Patriotic Union political party. The consequences for Colombian democracy were incalculable, and accountability for the slaughter has been minimal.

So when a respected non-partisan, civil society organization like INDEPAZ documents 123 assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders just since last January, people rightly fear a return to a brutal, not-so-distant past.

This brings us to victims' rights.

The 8 million victims of Colombia's internal armed conflict are overwhelmingly civilians. It's civilians who have been killed, disappeared, raped, tortured and forcibly displaced – far more than armed combatants on either side.

Under international law, victims have rights. Rights to truth. Rights to justice. Rights to reparations. And Rights to a guarantee of non-recurrence – meaning the violence against them will not be repeated, that it will, once and for all, end so that peace may take hold.

As President Santos has often said, the peace accord was written to take these rights into account: it sets up a truth commission, a special unit to search for the disappeared, and a transitional justice process for those responsible for abuses. There is particular attention paid to women, and to indigenous and Afro-descendant populations.

On paper, there's plenty to work with.

I would go further: the rural reform envisioned in the accord, the guarantees of political participation and the full dismantling of paramilitary organizations, are all incredibly important for transforming the idea of non-recurrence into reality.

But again, the question is really about what's happening on the ground. Is Colombia's infamous cycle of impunity being broken? Are people able to speak their minds, organize, protest, participate in politics without been gunned down? Are people able to support the peace accord and press for its full implementation without putting their lives in danger?

Because if not, there is no peace. There won't be a chance to build it, and any thought of non-recurrence – of breaking and ending the cycle of violence – will vanish into thin air.

I have spent nearly two decades fighting for peace in Colombia. I know from experience that human rights must be at the heart of peace-building – not as a talking point, but as a concrete, demonstrated commitment to create the conditions that allow people to live their lives freely and fully.

In Colombia, its own history demands that those conditions must include ending impunity for assassinations. They must include honoring commitments to give back stolen land, ensure local control and improve livelihoods for rural and ethnic communities. And they must include recognizing that women are full citizens and participants in their society who make up their own minds about their destinies.

Our witnesses today will be far more eloquent than I am on these issues. I look forward to their recommendations for how members of the U.S. Congress can do more to help them achieve their hope of peace.

Before introducing our witnesses:

- **I ask unanimous consent** to enter all the witnesses' testimonies for the record.
- **I ask unanimous consent** to enter into the record a May 29th letter to Secretary of State Pompeo from 73 Members of Congress expressing urgent concern and need for greater action over the murders of Colombian human rights defenders and local social leaders.
- **I also ask unanimous consent to enter additional statements for the record** received from the Latin America Working Group, the U.S. Institute for Peace, Oxfam America and the National Security Archive.
- **And I ask unanimous consent** to enter into the record the list of human rights defenders and social leaders assassinated from January 4 through July 4, 2018, as documented by INDEPAZ.