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# Report on Humanitarian Visit to Colombia

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November/December 2016

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## Introduction

The delegation was made up of union activists from the UK and Ireland, two MPs, a senior solicitor and a senior journalist. They were accompanied by members of the Justice for Colombia team.

This was a humanitarian visit to listen to the first hand testimonies of local people and groups and to then feedback and to apply pressure to the British Ambassador to Colombia and the Colombian Attorney General's Office.

**Sunday 27 November**

## **Hotel meetings with representatives of MOVICE, CPDH, CCAJAR, Hijos e Hijas, CIJYP**

The delegation arrived in Bogota on Sunday 27 November and had their first meeting at 14.00 with representatives of human rights organisations MOVICE, CPDH, CCAJA, Hijos e Hijas, CIJYP. The testimonies heard set the scene for the rest of the trip, namely after the peace agreement they want guarantees of protection from persecution – a huge issue being that many activists had been murdered. Landowners and political interests are using paramilitaries to attack human rights activists and they were acting with impunity. They stated clearly that they valued meetings such as this with JFC so they can highlight these abuses.

The next meeting was with spokespersons from the Patriotic March and they were worried that a form of genocide was being perpetrated against them. They are a political movement, a coalition of unions and peasants. Three had been assassinated in the previous two weeks, five in a month and seventy six this year – they are just human rights defenders. Raids on homes were happening with forced displacement and imprisonment. Ironically a new chapter in the hostility was happening to try and derail the peace process. Individuals are attacked and organisations smeared by local authorities and also at national level. One target during raids was electronic equipment and databases so these can be used to issue death threats against the spokespersons and other activists. There has been a sharp rise in killings just before the signing of the peace accord. FARC areas are targeted by paramilitaries as well as key economic areas – so there is a whole complexity of where this is happening. All they are asking for is protection for the opposition.

In Colombia a small economic elite persuaded the state to allow them to amass land and wealth and this is causing a problem with the ordinary people. This wealthy elite are using the media and many other groups to support them. They have impunity and are using paramilitaries to murder thousands of activists to defend the interests of the elite. Seven million have been displaced and had their land taken from them. The land in part is used for large mining and corporate projects. The far right don't want a peace and justice commission, they don't want any traceability of these acts and the Patriotic union amongst others remain convinced that these actions against the opposition activists can be traced back to the state as no serious investigations take place and no convictions are ever achieved.

Peasant farmers defending their right to stay on their land are using 'Pedagogy for peace' to educate people about what is happening for example activists being murdered for demonstrating against oil exploration on land. They are calling for international support for full implementation of the peace agreement to help individuals and organisations. When the activists were asked what could be done to help, their response was that they needed a declaration of support for, and demanding respect for the opposition and peace process to the UK government and Colombian embassy. To also focus on the actions of international

companies. Human rights agencies need to stay at least five years and not to leave too early else they may have to return.

EU funds going to Colombia for support are passing through the government but it needs to go direct to the projects including integrating the paramilitaries back in to society. LGBT has been hit badly by the conflict.

## Monday 28 November

### Meetings at CUT headquarters

On Monday 28 November we started with a meeting of the CUT Executive and the delegation then split to have meetings with various union leaders from both public and private sectors including in one grouping: ANTHOC (Health), ASPU (Higher Education), FECODE (Teachers), ASTDEMP (Public Workers), SUNET (Public Workers). The second group included USO (Colombian Oil Workers), SINTRAECOL (Electricity), SINTRACARBON (Energy), FENSUAGRO (Agricultural workers).

CUT were adamant that all the horrors that we hear are as a result of neo-liberal policies. Not against free trade but the current trade agreements that are damaging the ordinary people – this included the EU/Colombia trade deal. Colombia is in its worst state economically with the government having the least amount of money to spend. 90% of Colombian people are suffering as a result. The money flows to the few and to multinationals. One popular soft drinks manufacturer has been accused of ignoring worker's rights and has had two hunger strikes from its local workforce – the workers union want pressure applied. In the Colombian health service 85% of workers are on precarious or zero hour contracts. It is claimed the service is heading for full privatisation. This of course is described publicly as flexibilisation of the workforce. Health transnationals are taking over. 'The Journey of Death' is a phenomenon where a seriously ill person is taken by ambulance from hospital to hospital because they don't have the right medical insurance and eventually they die in the ambulance. ANTHOC (Health) is one of the worst affected by death threats.

All of these unions need the pressure applied from the international community as they feel the Colombian state appears to take far more notice from negative international publicity and pressure than it does from its own people and organisations.



[Photo Miguel Beltran]

## **Meeting with Mothers of Soacha**

In the afternoon the delegation met with a group called the 'Mothers of Soacha' they listened to testimonies - here they heard that tens of thousands of the population has been targeted with human rights abuses. These include the 'forced disappeared' and the 'false positives' – murders of innocent people to make the soldiers look better by hitting targets given to them by the executive branch of the government. These targets are meant to be to kill guerrillas but innocent young men become easy prey and are killed to reach the targets handed down. Rewards are given to soldiers for bodies of guerrillas that they can produce – this was a decree in law but is no longer in force. The army would legally recruit young people then kill them and presented them as guerrillas. Despite the decree no longer being in force, according to the Mothers the military still kill civilians. Currently four thousand cases are being investigated against soldiers who have the legal support of the state. All this came to light due to the Mothers of Soacha. The mothers are battling to get to the truth but all this is denied by the government. Military units all over the country were allegedly involved. There has been many death threats made against the mothers to try to stop them investigating. They had heard of one Major who had given the equivalent of £50 for each boy killed.

## **Meeting with FARC peace negotiators**

The last meeting of the day was with the FARC leading peace negotiators. They were in Bogota to sign the new peace agreement – 40% of the FARC are women. They were worried about what would happen after the signing. A host of new laws needed to go through a fast track else they will be delayed substantially. These laws would provide protections for members of the FARC including one which is an amnesty law. The FARC were very worried about the delays and at the time were negotiating daily with the government. There is a gender sub-commission as part of this which came out of the women in the FARC wanting to gain equality for the women's groups within the process. LGBT is also in the gender agreement.

In the truth commission there will be a sexual violence focus on gender attacks. Also asked for by the FARC is education – reincorporation in to society economically, socially, politically and educationally. They want agreements locally and internationally with universities getting validation and recognition of their courses.

The delegation was told by the FARC that at the time of disarmament the government wanted details of young members of the FARC and these amounted to thirty not the thousand that the government expected. The FARC say they have rules against young recruits. The FARC also said that it was propaganda that they were kidnappers to degrade the public view of them. Again they said they had only nine economic hostages and the government claimed nine thousand. The FARC claim kidnappings by others had been attributed to them. Worryingly the FARC say they have no faith in the justice system and so part of the agreement is a completely different system separate from the existing one. The new justice model will focus on the truth and the FARC said they were optimistic about the new model.

The FARC said many death threats were being made against members of the peace process from the far right who want it to end. As part of the process there is a land agreement – a land fund of three million hectares for peasant farmers. Peasant farmers currently have seven million hectares of land they don't hold title for but this is to be legitimised.

**Tuesday 29 November**

### **Meetings at San Antonio (Buenaventura)**

Tuesday 29 was an early internal flight to Buenaventura. The delegation had breakfast with locals at San Antonio which is a neighbourhood created to locate families displaced by the expansion of the port. Buenaventura was the largest port built by local people but now they are being forcibly displaced in favour of large companies as the port economy expands. This is a direct effect of trade agreements – foreign investment is being made in the port particularly Spanish and Irish. In the year 2000, paramilitaries were brought in to clear the area for companies economic interests. In 2007 there was a proposal to relocate the local population. Paramilitaries came in to spread fear and people began to leave. In 2013 some people were moved to San Antonio – this was to be a staged relocation with the local authority promising all the usual services would be provided. However in 2016 there is still

no school, health service or security. There is a brand new play area with equipment for children to play on but there is no safety surface below and the area is surrounded by rubble. There is also unfinished areas of bare soil which contains standing water providing the perfect habitat for mosquitos.



[Photo Buenaventura]

'Chop houses' were set up in the area where people would be taken at night and dismembered alive to force people by fear to relocate to a new area where there was no market and overcrowding. In San Antonio there is a real risk of community problems due to overcrowding. These families were mainly fishing, timber or port families and now they have no work. There is no welfare and 90% of the people here are displaced due to violence. Paramilitaries are now trying to take control of the area and ordering curfews, controlling the food and creating a protection racket. Local people don't have a way to earn money for the basics. San Antonio now has people from different areas so they don't know each other and they are in fear of, 'bad people coming back.' They receive no help from their local politicians. In 2005 paramilitaries invited eleven boys to play football but instead they tortured the boys to scare the community – there were thirty five massacres of boys and young men aged sixteen to twenty five. Killings are still happening and there is no security force to stop them.

Five young girls from near to San Antonio were violently raped by paramilitaries. Mothers received death threats and no help was given other than from international organisations. In the last three years in San Antonio three people have been killed – one per year. The local people want the delegation to raise these issues of missing services including security.

## **Meetings at city of Buga (Buenaventura)**

Late in the afternoon the delegation arrived in the city of Buga to visit striking workers of a glass making multinational. They employed the majority of workers on unstable contracts with few rights. After setting up Sintradit, a trade union, and submitting a list of demands to their employers they were fired and are now camped outside the factory.

## **Wednesday 30 November**

### **Meetings in northern Cauca**

Wednesday 30 November saw the delegation move to northern Cauca, south of Cali. This was for a community meeting at one of the future FARC peace zones. Many people were there, the visit was organised by the Patriotic March, FENSUAGRO, CPDH and indigenous



[Photo Chopshop]

communities. This was to be a place where the delegation would listen to testimonies from many people openly and a few who were too scared and wanted to give theirs in private. The delegation were invited because the government listens more to foreign voices than those of the Colombians we are told.



[Photo Patriotic march seated]

Christian Delgado head of the Patriotic March gave a briefing – he tells us the area is in the central mountain range of Colombia with lots of natural resources and is an important strategic area. The valley has mass projects including the planting of sugar cane. He reminds us the conflict is fifty two years old. Since the ceasefire the impact of the military on the population has been reduced, however the political attacks on activists has increased. One hundred and twenty four members of the Patriotic March have been killed – twenty eight from Cauca formed four years ago. Eighty human rights activists were killed in 2016. September to November five members were killed from Cauca alone. This has happened where there is a large military and police presence. Many death threats come in the form of a leaflet with names of activists on and the police seemingly do nothing. This is a form of social cleansing.

Graffiti started to appear around the new zone signed by a paramilitary group coming in to the village. The police and army enter and arbitrarily detain leaders of local human rights groups. In these areas people are well organised and have demonstrations but these have been brutally put down with many people injured. Paramilitaries are targeting activists and former members of the FARC. The victims have been given a voice in the peace process which has been negotiated and this is very important to the FARC as part of the truth and justice commission to try and ensure no repetition. They are also asking for reparations – not asking for payments but for psychological treatment and other support. The FARC want no repetition of the attacks and say they are fully committed to the peace process – they will leave their arms behind but they need guarantees they won't be killed.

The local people's testimonies included: someone speaking about their father who was a human rights defender and member of the Patriotic March and was campaigning against a large mining project. He was mayor of the municipality and was defending the rights of the local people. He was murdered just fifteen minutes away from a police base. After the other local activists became targets but the army and police again seemingly do nothing. The family of the murdered mayor have had paramilitaries showing up at their house and firing gun shots. The delegation were asked to raise this with the Attorney General's Office.

Another testimony talked about political prisoner campaigning – they carry out legal and political support but have suffered at the hands of the military and this is why they need to speak to foreign delegations. They claim in prison there are lots of human rights abuses. The health situation for combatant prisoners is very poor. A lack of medical support, poor diet, untreated medical conditions and even anecdotes of glass being found in prisoners food. Violent prisoners have been moved to prisons containing the FARC who become targets inside the prison.

The local peasant farmers are now organising themselves with a self-protection force. They are unarmed but monitor areas and want legal recognition that they monitor the local community. While the delegation was at the site, security was provided by members of an indigenous guard and peasant guard.

Later that day the delegation moved to the Colombian army base for the Apollo Task Force Command. Part of their remit is to provide security for the local population. There were three Colonels in attendance with several lawyers both military and civilian. We were given verbal presentations from two Colonels who controlled districts. We were then invited to ask questions which we did in a very robust way and at times the atmosphere was quite tense. The Colonel in charge insisted the army is respectful of the constitution and the people. He stated the armed groups are welcome to live in peace in Colombia once again and that there would be no obstruction to peace from the army. The Colonel stated, 'We have not identified any paramilitary presence in our area.' He said there had been no complaints from any mayor's office of the presence of paramilitaries and that if any were to be identified then they would, 'Combat them with all our force.'

The Colonel stated that each soldier was trained in human rights and that they have specialist advisers to help including lawyers. He said this makes them a more professional force closer to the people.

The delegation expressed surprise of what the Colonel had said regarding the paramilitaries – he again denied any evidence of paramilitary presence and said they are stories from the local population with no concrete base. He further stated that 2003/2005 was the last verified evidence of paramilitary activity and since then there has been none. He said many problems in the area are from drug trafficking gangs and it suited them to strike fear in the local population. They send out leaflets and put up graffiti but this is not from paramilitaries.

The Colonel told the delegation of a ministerial directive to attack any armed organised group operating including criminals and said he would act. We mention that the highest rate of paramilitaries in the Tambo region was 2006 (later than he claimed they exist).

The Colonel stated they are focussed on their legitimacy in the eyes of the population and that they regularly meet with mayors. He said they analysed twenty seven murders in 2016 and said they were criminal not paramilitary perpetrated.

In response to questions the Colonel stated that the army can't investigate, they can only report or prevent in the first place. If they are suspicious about someone or a group they report it to the Attorney General's office who investigate and then instruct the army to act. To date not a single instruction has come from the Attorney General's office and they have had no information from any professional office that paramilitaries are operating in their area. The Colonel further stated that they don't lie to the community – it is not in their interests to do so. He said the delegation may have been told stories by local people about the army and armed groups but he said, 'As a Catholic we are not linked to the paramilitaries, we defend the people, we aren't politicians and we have honour. We understand the worries and threats, we risk our careers if we don't act in our jurisdiction. We have improved, we have cleaned up our act and bad apples are in prison. We are becoming a preventative force not just reactive to prevent assassinations. We have been ordered to protect the FARC against military action.' One of the last things the Colonel said was that the army is one of the most loved institutions by the people.

## **Thursday 1 December**

### **Meeting with FARC prisoners at Chiquinquirà prison**

Thursday 1 December - The delegation split in two this day and the author attended the Chiquinquirá prison. This is a prison holding exclusively FARC prisoners and despite the peace process they were still being treated by the prison staff as prisoners of war and were treated with high security precautions. This however is a pilot as most FARC are in prisons with others that they consider dangerous towards them. The FARC created a National Prison Movement to fight for their rights. The leaders are often moved around and isolated from the rest of the FARC. The prisons can be a dangerous place and one died due to lack of medical care. Human rights violations and poor conditions are self-evident inside the prison. For example they have very limited access to drinking water – just one hour per day. They have to use containers to store it for the rest of the day. They have access to medical staff but those staff have no medications at all and no possibility to refer prisoners to a hospital for treatment. As far as their food is concerned it is not what they were used to and gives

them a poor diet – it's not the right quality or quantity. In the afternoon they have no means of preparing hot food. The dining room has no tables or chairs so they eat at the floor level. There is nowhere to study, no areas to read or write.

The few things the FARC prisoners have is from good will from outside. The delegation took in packages of toiletries and personal hygiene products as they are not available to the prisoners – these were painstakingly searched prior to our entry to the prison, reducing the time we had inside. Access to the telephone is expensive and they are often cut off early and feel the guards then use the credit for themselves.

Visitors from outside have to go through a tortuous process and feel they are treated as prisoners themselves. The delegation had fingerprints taken on the way in and out of the prison. They are allowed no visits from children above the age of twelve and no blood related visitors despite the regulations saying they can. There is no social code or legal basis for the FARC going back in to society. Prisoners in general are treated as if they are a market product, it's an abusive model for those who have power over them.

The FARC prisoners are worried they now have a stigmatised bad name courtesy of the state – they say they are very different to how they are portrayed. The prisoners are worried about when they are released – they will be considered the worst of society and that will affect their ability to lead a normal life such as obtaining loans, getting a job etc. Recently notes of threat have started appearing on the Internet saying FARC sympathisers and social leaders are a military target. They are asking for support to help them get started such as access to education on release.

The FARC also want political power out of the process. They have many needs to help them integrate back in to society especially those injured during the conflict. They are asking for economic and educational projects to help integrate orphans. They want improved conditions in the prisons and respect for human rights. The government has put the priority on control rather than human rights in the prisons and some prisoners have died due to lack of medical attention. The female prisoners – many are a long way from their children and with the stigma of being a member of the FARC it's not easy for them to receive a visit. Many women haven't seen their children for years. They are also wanting empowerment as political entities. Their society is a patriarchal one that doesn't allow for women from the countryside to be political actors. They want help to rebuild the trade unions; support for help with drugs in prisons and HIV infection – drugs bring corruption in prison and Colombia.

## **Friday 2 December**

### **Breakfast meeting with British Ambassador to Colombia (Pete Tibber)**

Friday 2 December the delegation met with the British Ambassador to Colombia Peter Tibber. We put the points forward that various people had asked us to. I personally spoke for Miguel Beltran who I had met earlier in the week, asking why was it that he was still

unable to get employment in a university even though he has been released from custody. I also asked about security for Miguel and his family.

### **Speech to ASPU annual conference by Rob Goodfellow**

The delegation then split in three with me going to ASPU who were having their annual conference and they had invited me to speak – I went through the week from the delegations point of view and they have asked for closer ties with UCU.

It is easy to dismiss the work of a delegation like this as meddling or insignificant. What I have to point out is that the ordinary people we met as well as activists, do not consider it meddling or insignificant – they consider it vital to their well-being and to a positive way forward, however long that takes.

## **Conclusion**

This report tries to give a flavour of the hardship and extreme conditions and violence the ordinary people in Colombia face and even more so if they identify themselves as an activist – either with a union or a human rights group. The military do not seem to be playing their full part in the peace process by protecting people. There is a very real risk that this peace process will go the same way as other attempts - that members of the FARC will be assassinated in large numbers and they will feel compelled to protect themselves and once again take up arms. This is a depressing outlook and hopefully one that will turn out to be false.

To make this peace process work the FARC and the ordinary people need access to basic human amenities close by to their living accommodation – medical facilities, education, police protection, sanitary living conditions, jobs and social amenities.

There also needs to be some reality regarding the crop replacement programme. Trying to persuade peasant farmers to replace a high cash crop like Coca with a low income and cumbersome replacement like potatoes just isn't going to work at least not without heavy subsidies and the necessary infrastructure to get the crop to market.

The ordinary Colombian people need to be included in the wealth generation of the country, when we make such statements about the UK population maybe we should spare a thought for the Colombian peasants and their day to day struggle merely to survive.

As individuals we should be putting pressure on the British and Colombian governments to show that we won't be fobbed off with excuses. The Colombian people need action from us all and they need it now.

## Glossary

**ANTHOC** is the national trade union representing workers in the health sector. The General Secretary **Carmen Mayusa**, is a former political prisoner, and will attend the meeting. JFC, along with British unions, campaigned for her release. She was held for two years without trial.

**ASPU** is the national trade union representing university professors. Many academics have been imprisoned in Colombia or killed for researching the armed conflict or speaking out against armed actors. General Secretary, **Pedro Hernández Castillo**, will attend.

**ASTDEMP** represents public sector workers in the department of Santander, north-east Colombia.

**Buenaventura** is a city port that lies on the South Western coast of Colombia, not far from the city of Cali which lies further inland. It is one of Colombia's most important ports handling 60% of the country's imports and exports. Since 1994 the port has been run by large transnational companies which are now looking to expand the port. After privatisation the companies dismantled the port unions, and today only a third of the port workers are unionised.<sup>1</sup> The port is likely to become even more important owing to the expansion of imports that will come from Colombia's free trade agreements. The city is also an important shipment point for drugs. Little of this economic activity benefits the residents.



The city's social situation is horrifying. According to the UNDP 'Buenaventura is one of the saddest examples of poverty and social underdevelopment in Colombia. Its health, education, employment and income indicators are disheartening'. More than 80% of the population live in poverty, unemployment officially hovers at around 30% but is probably higher, and electricity and water supplies are unreliable. 90% of the population self-identifies as 'afro-Colombian'. 65% of the population has no access to sewerage.

According to Human Rights Watch entire neighbourhoods of the city are now under the control of the 'Urabenos' and 'la Empresa' paramilitary groups, and it suffers from widespread human rights abuses, including forced displacements, disappearances and assassinations. A 2015 report by the National Centre for Historical Memory, stated that between 1990 and 2013 there were 4799 homicides, 475 forced disappearances, 26 massacres and 153,000 people displaced in Buenaventura.<sup>2</sup> The rival gangs control extortion rings and drug trafficking in the area. Since 2013 around 150 cases of disappearances have come to light, with local residents reporting the existence of houses being used by

<sup>1</sup><https://nacla.org/article/buenaventura-colombia-where-free-trade-meets-mass-graves>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2015/buenaventuraPuebloSinComunidad/buenaventura-a-un-pueblo-sin-comunidad.pdf>

paramilitaries for the sole purpose of [chopping up their victims](#). The city has become notorious for the cases of dismemberments and torture that see body parts regularly washed up onshore. The paramilitaries have imposed a law of silence on the city, as well as dividing it to such an extent that people cannot freely move around.

In March 2014, after strong international pressure and a damning report from Human Rights Watch, President Santos ordered nearly 800 troops into the city to retake control from the paramilitaries. However, it appears that the paramilitaries have merely laid low, awaiting the withdrawal of the troops. Others allege that the troops and city authorities are at worse cooperating with the paramilitaries, or at best turning a blind eye to their activities.

At the start of 2015 news of so-called chop houses surfaced again with two new cases. The dismembered bodies of Leonardo Casierra and Jonathan Suarez were found together in an unmarked grave on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> January. This comes just weeks after the body of the 21 year old Eider Ceron was found in a similar state on Boxing Day. Altogether, around 44 people were reported missing in 2014 and 4 bodies were discovered in the first month of 2015.

**Cauca Region** - The department of Cauca is located in the central south west of Colombia in the Andes Mountains. The region is a strategic corridor that allows the quickest possible connection with the Pacific Coast and with Ecuador. While the economy is predominantly agricultural its geological location in the Andes means Cauca is rich in a variety of minerals and natural resources. The area has also seen an increase in production of coca, the raw base of cocaine, in recent years. The local population is made up of mainly *campesinos* (peasant farmers) and indigenous people.



Cauca has been described as the 'epicentre' of the Colombian conflict.<sup>3</sup> The FARC guerrillas, Colombian army, and paramilitary groups all have a permanent presence in the region. Former FARC Commander Alfonso Cano, was killed there when the army attacked a FARC camp on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2011. Prior to the bilateral ceasefire on 29th July this year, the region was the scene of constant confrontations between the Colombian army and the FARC - the high military presence in the region has led to severe human rights violations, with civilians killed in the cross fire, their towns, homes and infrastructure occupied by armed actors and forced to flee their homes due to violence. According to the International Red Cross, during the last 10 years in Cauca, over 6,450 people have been displaced from their homes.<sup>4</sup>

In a speech in September 2012 President Santos, said 'the department of Cauca is one of the most afflicted by the internal conflict and it will be one of those that benefits the most if we achieve peace'.<sup>5</sup> In the plebiscite on the peace agreement between the Colombian

<sup>3</sup><http://m.elespectador.com/impreso/judicial/articulo-366658-el-cauca-sigue-encendido>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.portafolio.co/economia/sigue-desplazamiento-el-cauca-enfrentamientos>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/paz/articulo-374788-cauca-seria-el-mas-beneficiado-paz-santos>

government and the FARC on 2 October, Cauca overwhelmingly backed the agreement, with 62% voting Yes. More than 5,000 *campesinos* marched in the department at the end of October, demanding the implementation of the Havana peace agreement. Yet, Cauca continues to be one of the worst affected regions of abuses to date.

**CCAJAR -the Jose Alvear Restrepo Human Rights Lawyers Collective** is one of Colombia's leading lawyers' organisations working on cases of prisoners, victims of state crimes, and abuses by multinationals. They have taken several high-profile cases to international courts and represent the victims of the DAS (former intelligence services – see thematic brief).

**Jomary Ortegón**, CCAJAR President, will attend.

**Chiquinquirá Prison** is where many of the FARC prisoners are being held - around 300 FARC prisoners are currently in the prison after being moved there recently as part of peace process. Members of the FARC will participate in the new transitional justice system after the implementation of the peace agreement.

**CIJYP - The Interchurch Commission for Justice and Peace** is a longstanding human rights organisation with more than 25 years experience accompanying community organisations and particularly working with Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups. CIJYP provides humanitarian, legal, and psychological accompaniment to communities working to assert their rights through nonviolent means.

**Clara López** has been Minister of Labour since April 2016. She previously served as Acting Mayor of Bogotá from 2011 to 2012 and was the Presidential candidate for the Alternative Democratic Pole Party in the 2014 election.

The **Congressional Peace Commission** is a formal cross-party commission including members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate and is responsible for matters relating to the peace processes with the FARC and ELN guerrilla groups.

**CPDH - the Permanent Committee for Human Rights**, Colombia's largest human rights organisation, with regional offices in twelve areas of Colombia. They document and denounce human rights abuses, represent prisoners and victims of state and paramilitary abuses. Many CPDH leaders and activists around Colombia have been threatened, forced to flee their homes or even assassinated. JFC facilitates a project funded by Irish trade unions to support the organisation giving legal assistance to imprisoned activists. **Erika Gomez**, CPDH director, will attend.

The **CUT** is the largest trade union confederation in Colombia. Its executive is made up of 21 members – (although one of them Huber Ballesteros, also the FENSUAGRO Vice President, is currently imprisoned), representing a broad range of sectors. The executive are full time positions. Several leading members will receive the delegation. The CUT has around 700,000 members in around 700 affiliated unions. The CUT is affiliated to the ITUC.

The **FARC** is the largest left-wing guerrilla group in the country, formed in 1964. They have been in a peace process with the Colombian government since 2012 and last week signed a peace agreement. See thematic briefing for more details.

**FECODE** is the largest union in the country and represents teachers. It has also had, alongside **FENSUAGRO**, the most members assassinated.

**FENSUAGRO** is the union representing agricultural workers, both agro-industry workers and peasant farmers. It has had well over 1000 activists murdered and its Vice President Huber Ballesteros is currently imprisoned alongside over 100 other members.

**Hijos y Hijas - (Sons and Daughters)** is a group that brings together the children of murdered trade unionists and other civil society leaders.

**Huber Ballesteros** is one of Colombia's most well known trade union and opposition leaders. On 25 August 2013, one week before he was due to travel to Britain to address the TUC Conference, he was arrested and accused of 'rebellion' and 'financing terrorism'. A member of the CUT executive, he is also the Vice President of Fensuagro, the Colombian Agricultural Workers' Union. Huber is also the National Organiser of the 'Patriotic March' and at the time of his arrest he was one of the spokespersons of the mass strikes taking place across Colombia which included agricultural, health, transport and energy sectors. His case has been marred by a lack of due process and no trial has yet begun. In November 2013, JFC handed in a petition signed by over 13,000 signatures for his release. He was nominated for the Norwegian 'Arthur Svensson' trade union prize and the SOLIDAR prize by Unison.

**Humanitarian Zone** The humanitarian zone Puente–Nayero, Buenaventura is the first urban humanitarian zone in Colombia, set up on 13 April 2014 as a result of long-standing community-led mobilisation. The zone comprises approximately 267 families who have declared the area a no – go zone for paramilitaries, have resisted the forced recruitment of their children and received protection measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in September 2014. Since being established, the community has been under constant threat from paramilitaries including from death threats and shootings, yet despite being informed, the police have not taken adequate action to prevent the attacks and several families have been forced to displace from the area.

A second humanitarian zone was inaugurated on 6 October 2016 in an adjacent street, Punta Icacó. Around 75 families have come together to resist the insecurity facing their community and the extortion by illegal armed groups. The zone hopes to be given protection measures by the ICHR.

**Lilany Obando** is an academic and activist, single mother and former political prisoner who was imprisoned in 2008, whilst working with FENSUAGRO. JFC and unions around the world campaigned for her release. After almost 4 years in prison she was freed. Despite huge irregularities in her case, she was subsequently convicted of rebellion and sentenced to house arrest, and was freed in 2015.

**Dr Miguel Beltran** is a former political prisoner, Sociology lecturer and a member of the ASPU university trade union, well known for his publications analysing the roots of the armed conflict and his criticism of the state's role. Miguel was released from prison on 1 September 2016 after the Colombian Supreme Court repealed his eight-year prison sentence for the crime of 'rebellion'. Miguel had been held in La Picota prison since July

2015. This was the second time the prominent academic has been deprived of his freedom by Colombian authorities - he was imprisoned for two years between 2009 and 2011 after he was falsely accused of collaborating with the FARC. JFC and British trade unions, particularly the UCU, campaigned incessantly for Miguel's release.

**Mothers of Soacha**, mothers of the young men that were murdered and hearing from them about their struggle to secure justice. Many of them have been threatened as a result of their campaign to have the soldiers responsible brought to justice.

**MOVICE – the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes**, is a coalition of more than 200 of Colombia's human rights and victims' organisations, including some trade unions.

The **Patriotic March** is one of Colombia's largest opposition movements with over 1500 organisations affiliated, including trade unions, student organisations, peasant farmers and others. It has faced severe persecution since its founding just over four years ago – with 125 members murdered in this period. One of its key aims is to achieve a peace process which delivers social justice. The movement has organised several mass demonstrations calling for peace, mobilising one million people onto the streets in recent years. In 2013 it was one of the main organisers of the mass industrial action and had around 80 members imprisoned. Imprisoned trade union leader Huber Ballesteros was Head of Organising for the organisation at the time of his arrest.

The **Presidential Program for Human Rights** coordinates Colombia's public policy on human rights and international humanitarian law.

**SINTRAELECOL** is a national trade union representing workers in the electricity and energy sector. General Secretary, **Pablo Emilio Santos Nieto**, will attend.

**SINTRACARBON** is a national trade union representing workers in the coal mining industry. General Secretary, **Jairo Quiroz**, will attend.

**Soacha** is a poor suburb in southern Bogota. The 'false positives' or extrajudicial executions scandal broke in Colombia in 2008 after it was discovered that the Army had been offering young men from the neighbourhood false employment, murdering them and then claiming that they were guerrillas killed in combat – in order to qualify for the financial bonuses and promotions offered for high 'body count'. The thematic briefing gives an overview of the scandal.

**SUNET** is a national trade union representing public sector workers.

**USO** is the oil workers' trade union and one of the most high profile unions in the country having led several large industrial actions to defend the state oil company, ECOPETROL from privatisation. It has had over 100 members assassinated over the years and the leadership face many threats. General Secretary, **César Loza**, and Head of International, **Héctor Vaca**, will attend. Unite funds a project with USO.

# Information

## Human Rights

According to the human rights organisations *Somos Defensores* (We are defenders), Cauca has been one of the most dangerous regions for trade unionists, human rights defenders, peasant farmer leaders, and indigenous activists in the country in 2016. 54 activists were killed between January and September 2016, 12 of them in Cauca. These deaths follow a model of targeted assassinations of community leaders by paramilitary and illegal armed groups.

On 1 November Jhon Jairo Rodriguez, a peasant activist and member of both the trade union FENSUAGRO and the Patriotic March political organisation was assassinated in Caloto, in the north of the department. On 11 November, another peasant activist and Patriotic March member, José Antonio Velasco, was shot and severely injured. He died later in hospital.

Yimer Chavez Rivera, a member of the Organisation for Urban and Peasant's Development as well as the Popular and Campesino Guard, which seeks to protect land rights and promote peace, was with his wife when he was stopped on this motorbike by two hooded men, and shot on 17 October. His wife was also injured but she survived the attack.

On 8 September Cecilia Coicue, a peasant farmer and FENSUAGRO member, was killed. She owned land in an area named as one of the transitory zones where the FARC will concentrate to decommission weapons after the peace agreement is finalised.

Environmental campaigners and peasant activists, Joel Meneses Meneses, Nereo Meneses Guzmán and Ariel Sotelo, were shot dead by unidentified armed men in Cauca on 29<sup>th</sup> August, the first day of the bilateral ceasefire between the Colombian government and the FARC. It is reported that they had been receiving threats for over six months. Information from the environmental organisation of which they were a part, the *Comité de integración del Macizo Colombiano*, shows systematic threats and assassinations against peasant farmers, environmental campaigners, indigenous activists and those opposed to major mining projects, over the last few years.

On 26 March 2016, three young farmers from the northern Cauca region of Colombia were leaving one of their homes when a group of four armed men burst in and opened fire against them. Omar Zambrano, Erney Alvarado and Victor Andres Florez were all killed in the attack. The three men were hit by at least sixteen bullets and a young girl, the daughter of one of the victims, was also injured in the attack and had to undergo surgery to remove shrapnel from her chest. The local human rights organisation condemned the inaction of the Colombian Army which has an elevated presence in the municipality of Corinto where the attack took place.

On 28 February, the peasant farmer leader Maricela Tombé was shot dead in Playa Rica - El Tambo. She was a community leader and had been president of the Rural Ecological Association of Playa Rica (ASCAP), affiliate of FENSUAGRO. There had been reports of pamphlets threatening 'social cleansing' and local leaders by paramilitary groups in the area.

## Indigenous Protests

Cauca has seen large-scale indigenous and *campesino* protests over the last few years, as communities demanded the demilitarisation of the region. The NASA people have been engaged in a campaign since December 2014, demanding the return of 2000 hectares of land in the area of Corinto, which they claim as their ancestral lands, but which are now occupied by privately owned sugar cane farms. Over 2016 there have been repeated clashes between indigenous demonstrators and the police over the issue - in October one member of the riot police ESMAD died as police tried to eject indigenous protestors with force.

In May, during a nationwide strike by peasant farmers and indigenous communities - who were calling for the government to follow through on its promises to address the economic crisis in rural Colombia - the ESMAD violently repressed strikers, using tear gas and 'unconventional' weapons against protestors. Gersain Cerón and Marco Aurelio Díaz, both members of indigenous reserves in Cauca department died after being shot during protests on 2 June. 26 year old Willington Quibarecama Naquirucama was also killed on 30 May after he was run over by a riot police tank.

Evaristo Dagua Troches, a 64 year old peasant farmer, was assassinated in northern Cauca on 29 July. He was a one of the founding members of the Association of Peasant Farmers of the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone in Corinto and a member of the local indigenous community. The body of an indigenous woman was found decapitated and with signs of torture on 17 April, also in Corinto. Rubiela Coicue, who was 38 years old, was found by the side of the road leading to the municipality. Rubiela's daughter was the victim of an explosive device in September 2015.

In other incidents in the area, the child of an indigenous community leader was found tied up after being tortured by armed men who had been looking for his father Luis Guillermo Ascué Jumbe, a former mayor and governor of an indigenous reserve. It was also reported that on 18 April the army shot at the vehicle of a delegation of the North Cauca Indigenous Cauca after they supposedly didn't stop at a military checkpoint, putting the lives of those in the vehicle at risk.