

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

The global pandemic, which exposes existing problems in each country it ravages, is affecting the safety of Colombia's brave human rights defenders and social leaders who are putting their lives on the line to build lasting peace. We ask you to urge the Duque Administration to recommit itself to implementing the historic 2016 peace accords and protecting Colombia's endangered human rights defenders.

Colombia is now the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders. Over 400 human rights defenders have been murdered since the signing of the peace accords—a loss of committed and valiant civic leaders that Colombia cannot afford. The Colombian government's slowness in implementing the peace accords, bringing the civilian state into the conflict zones, and providing protection and ensuring justice for attacks against defenders have allowed this tragedy to go unchecked. This appears to be intensified as illegal armed groups take advantage of the pandemic and the government fails to respond, further increasing the vulnerability of targeted rights defenders and local leaders.

For example, on March 19, three armed men entered a meeting where farmers were discussing voluntary coca eradication agreements and killed community leader Marco Rivadeneira. Rivadeneira promoted peace and coca substitution efforts in his community and represented his region in the guarantees working group to protect human rights defenders and the national human rights network Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos. Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and poor farming communities like the San José de Apartadó peace community continue to suffer from the unchecked presence of illegal armed actors in their territories.

Marco Rivadeneira was one of the 23 social leaders killed between March 15 and April 24, during the initial period of Colombia's pandemic lockdown. According to the Colombian NGO, Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz – INDEPAZ, in the first three months of 2020, 71 social leaders and defenders were killed in Colombia. INDEPAZ also underscores the high-level of impunity for these and other killings – estimated to be around 95%.

To stop this tragedy, we ask you to urge the Duque Administration to:

- Improve protection of human rights defenders and social leaders, starting with effective investigations of attacks and threats against them, identifying those who ordered these crimes and publicly presenting investigation outcomes. The government must develop a road map for protection in consultation with defenders in the guarantees working group, including for pandemic-related challenges such as the need for personal protective equipment.
- The National Protection Unit must fund and implement collective protection measures with differentiated ethnic and gender approaches in consultation with communities. Collective measures agreed to with Afro-descendant and indigenous communities' authorities must be guaranteed. The self-protection mechanisms of the San José de

Apartadó peace community and similar humanitarian zones should be respected, including the support provided by international companions.

- Dismantle the paramilitary successor networks involved in drug trafficking, which fuel much of the violence against human rights defenders and social leaders. The government must honor its commitment to regularly convene the National Commission of Security Guarantees, which was set up by the accords to develop and implement plans to dismantle illegal groups and protect communities, social leaders, and ex-combatants.
- The Attorney General's special investigative unit must more effectively investigate, prosecute, and present results about these paramilitary and criminal networks. We welcome the new agreement between the Attorney General's Office and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia to train prosecutors and investigators in aggressively addressing these human rights crimes. It is critical the State end impunity in the murders, disappearances, assaults and threats against human rights defenders, social leaders, land rights and environmental activists, journalists, trade unionists and other defenders.
- Hold swiftly accountable Colombian Army intelligence members, including at the highest ranks, who ordered and carried out mass surveillance on 130 journalists (including U.S. reporters), human rights defenders, political leaders, and military whistleblowers. The U.S. should also ensure that U.S. aid does not assist, aid or abet such illegal surveillance, now or in the future.
- Vigorously implement the peace accords, including by adequately funding the transitional justice system, fully implementing the Ethnic Chapter, delivering on commitments for protection for ex-combatants and productive projects to reintegrate them into civilian life, and honoring commitments for truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition for victims of the conflict.

We urge you, Mr. Secretary, to ensure that all agencies of the United States speak clearly and publicly with one voice to condemn these ever-escalating murders and to press the Duque Administration to take the necessary steps to identify and prosecute the intellectual authors of these crimes and dismantle the criminal structures that protect them.

We further urge you to continue to provide valuable assistance to Colombia to implement the peace accords, provide humanitarian assistance for Venezuelan refugees and refugee receiving communities, and address the COVID-19 pandemic. U.S. counter-narcotics aid should take advantage of opportunities provided by the peace accords to carry out sustainable and lasting eradication and crop substitution with community support, focusing on working with communities to eradicate and replace coca as well as on dismantling trafficking networks, rather than returning to ineffective policies of aerial spraying and forced eradication.

Thank you for your attention to these important concerns in this difficult time.