

Colombia's Truth Commission: It's Time to Reflect—And Act

A truth commission offers an opportunity granted once in generations to reflect on how a society became engulfed in suffering and violence. More than that, it grants a once-in-generations opportunity to try to right the wrongs of the past and construct the path to a better future. Colombia's Truth Commission is just that, a once-in-generations opportunity to stop the cycle of violence that has already cost 450,000 lives.

This should not be a set of volumes that sits on the shelves of those who study conflict, but a living document that guides the way towards change. When you look at the heart-wrenching testimony and the analysis in the Truth Commission report, you see that every armed actor, from the guerrillas to the paramilitaries to Colombia's own armed forces, committed horrifying acts of violence and cruelty. But you also see that so many other actors, from members of Colombia's civilian national government to local and regional governments, from Colombian and multinational businesses to international donors, by direct action and by failure to act, helped to create and foster this violence. Colombian society needs to reflect, and change.

And the United States, which supported the Colombian government and armed forces so strongly during a period when human rights violations by many armed actors, including Colombia's armed forces, escalated and reached their peak, also needs to reflect and change.

With the publication of the Truth Commission report, and at this historical moment with a new government taking office in Colombia, there is a real opportunity for progress. It's time to not just listen but act on the Truth Commission's recommendations to deepen implementation of the 2016 peace accords, including of the accord's Ethnic chapter and rural reforms. It's time to get back to the negotiating table with the ELN, construct peace in rural communities, and move towards a more total peace. It's time at last to take more vigorous actions to dismantle paramilitary and organized crime networks that continue to cause so much damage to communities and to the rule of law. It's time to reflect and transform the United States' drug policy approach, which so deeply affected Colombia. It's time to make the structural reforms within the armed forces and police to realize a more human and humane vision of security.

It's time to finally protect the human rights defenders and social leaders whose lives remain in peril. And it's past due time to truly listen to the victims of violence and to recognize their dignity, the trauma they endured, the resistance and resilience they demonstrated, and the visions they have of a Colombia at peace.