

The end of the illusion for indigenous peoples in Colombia

The Peace Agreement signed in 2016 between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) raised hopes among the indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant populations and peasant communities that they might henceforward be able to live in peace on their territories. However, Iván Duque's new government has not fulfilled its side of the agreement and, far from incorporating areas abandoned by the guerrilla into the institutional life of the country, the end result is that these areas have been left to their own devices. Paramilitary groups are now free to compete for control of the territory and to murder social leaders as a way of subjugating rural populations. In addition to anti-personnel mines and forced confinements, massacres became an added mechanism for exerting this pressure in 2020.

By William Villa - November 1st, 2020

Murder, threats and the forced displacement of people have become instruments in Colombia's political history by which certain sectors of society with links to economic power legitimise and establish a particular way of organising the country, the regulations governing land ownership and the mechanisms for gaining control of subsoil resources. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, war was the means by which an ideology of nationhood was forged, while large agricultural and livestock estates were founded through blood and fire, either in the form of large landholdings or agribusinesses. This violent mechanism was also imposed with the aim of controlling and ransacking the forests, exploiting areas rich in mineral and energy resources and implementing large-scale development projects.

The country's current agrarian economy and subsequent consolidation of governing elites has taken place by expelling the populations that used to live in the inter-Andean valleys, the wide Caribbean plains, and the lowland and Amazonian piedmont area. Those who

previously exercised control and ownership of these areas were the indigenous peoples, longstanding Afro-descendant populations and *mestizo* peasant farmers.

The persecution and murder of indigenous leaders that is currently being experienced in Colombia must be seen within this context and dynamic of longstanding exclusion and violence. According to the General Assessment of Human Rights Violations and Offences against Indigenous Peoples, some 9,148 indigenous leaders were murdered over the 1985-2017 period for affirming their own cultural project: territorial defence, exercise of autonomy, application of justice and defence of women's and children's rights in the face of armed groups.

This report, produced by the Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights Commission, takes 1985 as its reference point because this is the year established in the Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as being the date following which the war's victims would be recognised the right to reparation, the right to truth with regard to the objects and motivations of those participating in the war, and the right to bring those identified as the perpetrators to justice.

Persistent murders of indigenous leaders

The Special Registry Report of Leaders and Human Rights Defenders Assassinated since the Signing of the Peace Agreement, produced by the organisations Indepaz, Cumbre Agraria and Marcha Patriótica, reports that: "From the signing of the Peace Agreement between the National Government and the FARC-EP to 15 July 2020, 971 social leaders and human rights defenders were murdered in Colombia (21 in 2016, 208 in 2017, 282 in 2018, 253 in 2019 and 53 in 2020 so far)".

The signing of the Peace Agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government in November 2016 brought to an end a cycle of war which, for 50 years, had affected the rural population disproportionately, and which had had a serious impact on indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant populations and peasant communities. This Agreement raised major hopes and expectations among indigenous peoples and their organisations that they would now be able to lead a peaceful life on their territories and consolidate their desired plans for

autonomy and development vision. And yet their rights have continued to be violated, with the situation in some regions even getting worse: between the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016 and the middle of 2020, 250 indigenous leaders were murdered. One of the regions in which the most violence against indigenous leaders has been seen is Cauca.

With the implementation of the Peace Agreement and the subsequent disarming of the FARC, areas previously controlled by these guerrilla forces were abandoned by their combatants with the expectation that the state would take action to incorporate these spaces into the country's institutional life through programmes aimed at creating an economy and culture based on legality. The reality has been quite the opposite, however, and the new government of Iván Duque, who took office in 2018, has not fulfilled its side of the agreement. These areas have consequently become a battleground between paramilitary groups competing for the territory. In this context, the murder of human rights defenders is an instrument these armed groups use to consolidate their control over the territory and subjugate the rural populations politically.

Another conflict that has been gaining ground is over drugs trafficking. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement, the area cultivated with coca crops has grown significantly. Prior to 2016, the area sown with coca stood at around 100,000 hectares. Since then, however, according to the UN Integrated Illicit Crop Monitoring System, coca plantations have consistently covered between 150,000 and 170,000 hectares.

Coca growing covered a likely area of some 14,000 hectares of the indigenous reserves in 2019. This is resulting in increased violence in all its forms. The authorities and leaders of some indigenous reserves are opting to resist or, failing this, proposing that these areas be substituted with food crops through programmes to be financed by the national government. The indigenous authorities' policy of defending their territory is seen as an obstacle by drugs traffickers and their armies, however, who respond with threats to their leaders, forced displacement from their territories and the murder of their community members.

In addition to establishing coca farms on reserve lands, the armed groups are trying to attract the local population, particularly the youths, to work either as day labourers on

these fields or in the drug trafficking networks or as armed soldiers. Resisting the forced recruitment of their youths and the establishment of armed groups on their territory has been a focus of the indigenous authorities' political action for decades. This position is one of the main reasons why their leaders have become the military targets of drugs trafficking rings.

Indigenous territories and spaces of war

The geographical area in which leaders are being murdered and territorial rights violated corresponds to the regions in which armed groups are competing for control of drugs trafficking routes, in which coca growing is concentrated and illegal mining established. They are also areas in which there have historically been clashes over control of and access to the land, or where there are substantial mining operations.

The indigenous population of Cauca department, particularly the Nasa people, have suffered disproportionately from the murder of their leaders. Some 94 indigenous leaders have been murdered since 2016, 28 of them in the first half of 2020 alone. This figure shows that this one region alone accounts for 37.6% of all murders of indigenous defenders.

Another territory badly affected by the violence is that of the Awá people. Some 25,000 Awá live on reserves in the south-west of Colombia, between the Pacific Coast and the Ecuadorian border. This region is home to some of the largest areas of illicit coca growing in Colombia. The area sown in the coastal municipalities amounts to around 45,000 hectares, or 25% of the total area cultivated in Colombia. This situation has characterised the region since the start of the 21st century and has resulted in violence for the indigenous and Afro-descendant populations living there. The Pai indigenous government has indicated in this regard that: "We have now had 425 community members murdered in Nariño since 2000. That's nearly two a month. In the last two and a half years alone, we have seen 30 Awá die at the hands of armed actors."

Alongside this, the presence of paramilitaries and the clashes between armed groups inside the indigenous reserves means the communities are forced into confinement for periods of time. On occasions, anti-personnel mines laid within their forests restrict their movements

and result in situations of food crisis. The indigenous Embera-Wounaan populations that live in the forested areas of Colombia's western region have spent the last two decades in just such an environment of distress, territorial pressure and persistent threats from armed groups.

Over the course of the last year, massacres have become the preferred method of extreme violence chosen by the armed groups. This phenomenon is aimed at creating fear among the indigenous population and immobilising them in order to undermine their capacity to resist the illegal groups entering their territory. The journalist Valerie Cortés has counted 43 massacres in 2020 so far: "Antioquia, Cauca, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Putumayo are the departments with the greatest number of massacres so far this year. There were 31 massacres on these territories, i.e. 72% of the total number recorded across the whole country. As is to be expected, this is also the area with the highest number of victims: 134 out of 181, approximately 74%."

Indigenous organisations in the face of violence

Since becoming aware of the situation on the territories and the threats against their leaders, the indigenous organisations have acted as a communication network capable of generating alerts aimed at mobilising the governmental and non-governmental institutions responsible for protecting indigenous rights. This role has made them a military target for criminal gangs and, on occasions, their leaders have suffered threats, been forced to move or have been murdered.

On the indigenous territories, the authorities have trained groups of guards to act as organisations for social internal control and territorial defence. Despite not being armed, these indigenous guards confront those illegally entering their territories, protect their leaders from paramilitary threats and mobilise the whole population to resist the violence.

Although the indigenous organisations do not have the capacity to directly confront the violence in their communities, their significance lies in acting as a communication network both within the country and internationally. Through immediate and peaceful prevention,

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the regional and national organisations have been instrumental in protecting and safeguarding the communities.

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