

Understanding Colombia Series

COLOMBIAN CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING FOR PEACE

In Brief

- Civilian activists, human rights defenders, and community leaders have organized significant peace initiatives over the past decade.
- The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó marks an unprecedented push for peace by Colombian civilians vowing to separate themselves from the warring parties; sadly, the community has received regular threats and attacks by armed actors.
- Civilians pushing for peace, justice, and the respect of human rights have continually come under attack in Colombia; most recently, these attacks have been intensified as a result of dangerous government stigmatization.
- Peace negotiations in Colombia void of civil society participation will be insufficient and unsuccessful.
- The international community must actively support civil society peace initiatives in Colombia.

Background

Peace has been highly elusive in the more than four-decades long conflict that has engulfed Colombia – with civilians being the most affected sector. Despite this, civilian-led peace initiatives continue to grow and flourish. The push for peace by civic groups increased dramatically in the 1990s following failed peace negotiations between the government and various illegal armed actors, the killings of *Unión Patriótica* members and an increase in narcotrafficking. More than a decade later, civilians throughout Colombia continue to search for paths to peace in spite of increasingly difficult and dangerous situations – including direct threats to their safety and lives, and those of their families.



Colombian Peace rally: Here the people of Colombia pour onto the streets to demonstrate for peace.

(Web Photo)

Important Facts

Citizen initiatives: For many years, Colombian civil society has been acting fervently to try and spark a transition to peace and put a halt to the on-going internal armed conflict. Following are just a few examples of the significant initiatives borne entirely from civilians in Colombia:

- In 1997, nearly 10 million Colombians registered in a symbolic vote in favor of a negotiated settlement to the war. The also voted for full respect for international humanitarian law and for human rights. So many Colombian civilians wanted to cast votes, that there were insufficient paper ballots, leading many to make their own ballots. This massive initiative for peace by the Colombian civil society was unprecedented. In fact, three times more people participated in this symbolic vote than those who voted in the 1998 presidential elections.
- In 2000, Colombian peace groups convened a meeting of a broad sector of Colombian society and the international community in Costa Rica to support and shape the peace process.
- In September 2008, *Redepaz* – the *Red Nacional de Iniciativas por la Paz y contra la Guerra* – organized a “Semana por la Paz” (A Week for Peace). During the seven days, thousands of Colombians joined in marches to demand the release of all hostages, demonstrations, and civic actions to clearly demonstrate their support for the end of the armed conflict.
- In February 2009, a group of 166 Colombian human rights organizations, politicians, labor leaders, and academics – among others – wrote an open letter to President Obama recommending initiatives to reach a negotiated peace to the on-going conflict.

San José de Apartadó Peace Community: The San José de Apartadó Peace Community was founded in March 1997 by citizens who wanted to separate themselves entirely from the conflict by refusing entry to and support for all armed parties – including the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the state security forces. Amidst the violence in Colombia, the community made the decision to farm in cooperative groups, denounce the culture of impunity in the country, not carry weapons, and refuse to provide any information to the warring parties. Making this nonviolence stand has not come easily; in fact, nearly 160 of the community’s members have been killed by the FARC, the paramilitaries, and the Colombian army/police. Moreover, none of these murders and threats have been solved or punished. Still, the community remains steadfast in its position.

Civil society must participate in negotiations: Despite the sense of frustration and desperation among Colombians, many still believe that the conflict must be ended through negotiations. The polarization perpetuated by the armed conflict has made it almost impossible for citizens to speak out and express different political ideas. Civil society involvement can make the peace process more representative of civilians' views, and is fundamental for rebuilding the country after the war. A vibrant civil society – including journalists, human rights advocates, labor unions, organizations representing women and ethnic groups, religious institutions, academics, student groups, and community leaders – is crucial for the establishment of strong, transparent and accountable government institutions and respect for rule of law that will be necessary for post-conflict reconstruction in Colombia.

Threats to the civilian peace movement: Although civil society is essential to reaching peace in Colombia, the voices of these activists are often muffled – if not silenced – by the Colombian authorities and illegal armed actors. Because of this, being a human rights defender or peace activist in Colombia is a dangerous job. Making the situation even worse, high-ranking officials in the government of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez – including the president himself – have recently made many disparaging public statements against these defenders and community leaders. As a result, threats and attacks on civilians pushing for peace, justice, and the respect of human rights have intensified. Worse still, these crimes go virtually unpunished, with near total impunity for the perpetrators.

The situation is worsening as it was evidenced by the recent allegations that the Presidential Intelligence Agency, the Department of Administrative Security DAS, has been illegally spying on members of the opposition, human rights activists, journalists and even Supreme Court Justices. The illegal wiretapping operation went deeper than surveillance, by employing a variety of different dirty tricks with the objective of “neutralizing and restricting” activist’s work.

Peace letter President Obama: With a new administration in office in Washington, many of Colombia’s most prominent civil society organizations, human rights leaders, and academics united efforts by drafting and signing a peace letter addressed to President Obama on February 26, 2009. The correspondence, signed by 166 Colombians, detailed recommendations for a negotiated solution to the ongoing internal armed conflict in Colombia

International support: The role of the international community in Colombia’s peace process has been limited thus far. The recent peace talks with the FARC and ELN guerrillas each had a group of countries from Europe and the Western Hemisphere that sought to facilitate dialogue. The UN’s representative to the peace process has played a key role, trying to salvage the process in early 2002. Despite these efforts, the international community must do more. USOC calls on the US and international institutions to use their good offices to promote the necessary conditions for a serious peace process with full civil society protection and participation.

Take Action!

Write a letter or call your US Congressmen/women asking them to denounce attacks on civilian peace activists and members of peace communities and demand that these crimes be investigated and punished. Ask that your congressional representatives take attacks on civilians working for peace into account before they certify Colombia’s human rights record and release more funding for the country’s security forces. To find the address and phone number of your senators and representatives, please visit www.congress.org

For More Information

Planeta Paz
www.planetapaz.org
Asamblea Permanente de la Sociedad Civil por la Paz
www.asambleaporlapaz.com
Redepaz
www.redepaz.org.co
Peace in Colombia
www.peaceincolombia.org
Fellowship of Reconciliation Colombia Program
www.forcolombia.org
Comunidad de Paz San José de Apartadó
www.cdpsanjose.org

“During all these years of violence, in the midst of this abandoned, forgotten land, just as a flower blooms in the desert, we have been tending the shoots of hope. Our birth and growth is an expression of the power of the people, power to rescue the beauty of life from such horror, and to recover our speech as the best tool for the resolution of conflicts.”

Participants’ statement during the ‘First Meeting of the Experiences of Peace Communities and Territories in Colombia’, Bogotá, November 1999

U.S. Office on Colombia

connecting civil society to policymakers

1326 9th Street, NW

Washington DC 2001

www.usofficeoncolombia.org

