

The coronavirus emergency and the assassinations of social leaders

Bogotá, March 27, 2020

The announcement of the first emergency health measures in Colombia proposed by the Duque administration for containing the COVID-19 pandemic has coincided in a worrisome manner with a series of attacks on and killings of social leaders, sparking fear and concern among the organizations and networks that defend human rights in Colombia.

Thursday, March 19 – one day before the confinement measures began to come into force in several cities and departments, and with world attention focused exclusively on the care measures and fears brought about by COVID-19 – marked the first of several especially tragic days for human rights defenders.

That day, well-known national leader Marco Rivadeneira was assassinated in the rural zone of Puerto Asís (Putumayo). He was pulled out of a meeting by three armed men in civilian clothes; moments later they assassinated him when he was engaged in a dialogue with the community in the village of Nueva Granada in search of solutions and alternatives for the coordinated substitution of illicit crops. Marco Rivadeneira, spokesperson of the National Operating Committee of the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (CCEEU or the Coordinación), a historical leader of peasant communities in Colombia, and a regional spokesperson of the National Process of Guarantees, was the highest profile agrarian leader in the department of Putumayo in recent years.

That same day two municipal council members were assassinated in two more regions of the country: Ángel Ovidio Quintero, member of the municipal council of San Francisco (Antioquia) and Ivo Humberto Bracamonte, member of the municipal council of Puerto Santander (Norte de Santander). The common characteristic of these three murders was the high profile of each of the victims. In the case of Marco Rivadeneira, it is the first time that the criminal structures that are behind the plan of systematically assassinating persons who defend human rights in Colombia have assassinated a spokesperson and leader of the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos, which is the most important and numerous of the human rights organizations in Colombia.

This situation has given rise to the fear that the attention given to the health emergency caused by the pandemic will not only render invisible the extermination of social leaders, but will also facilitate attacks on leaders who until now the killers had not dared to touch given the political cost it might entail. The Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos issued a pronouncement in which it blames this assassination on “the Government presided over by Iván Duque and the political faction that holds power today, and Minister [of Interior] Alicia Arango, who one month ago, and in Marco’s home department of Putumayo, said that **the number of human rights defenders who were dying was less than the number of persons dying due to the theft of cell phones.**” This homicide makes clear the merciless spate of assassinations by the paramilitary groups and dissident fronts that the Government allows and refuses to dismantle, which has escalated since the signing of the Final Peace Agreement. This course of conduct is clearly in line with the stated purpose of tearing up the peace agreement, while the Government simulates compliance.ⁱ According to the Coordinación, “this assassination corroborates once again the lack of security guarantees for human rights defenders and the lack of any decision on the part of the Government of Colombia to dismantle the criminal structures and paramilitary organizations that have been carrying out attacks on social leaders and persons who defend the peace process in the territories.”

These fears have been mounting with the new criminal actions targeting social leaders during the coronavirus crisis, as several social leaders told the newspaper The Guardian.ⁱⁱ In an article published on March 23, the British newspaper warned that social leaders in Colombia fear that the national quarantine – which officially began March 25 – will endanger them, since *“staying in one place makes them sitting targets”* for the armed groups. One leader said that during the confinement *“[t]hey are playing with our lives because they know that our bodyguards, the police and the justice system are going to be even less effective than they usually are.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

The compulsory preventive isolation decreed by the Government of Colombia has been taken advantage of to facilitate locating and wiping out social leaders. The indigenous organizations have denounced the same problems, pointing to the assassinations of two indigenous leaders in the department of Valle. On March 24 Ómar Guasiruma Nacabera and Samper Guasiruma were assassinated; indigenous leaders of the Embera people, they were removed from their home and assassinated right outside while staying home due to the compulsory quarantine, while two other members of the indigenous community were wounded (José and Víctor Guasiruma).^{iv}

In another incident that underscores these concerns, on March 24 Carlota Salinas was assassinated; she was a social leader who worked with the Organización Femenina Popular, a long-standing human rights organization in the middle Magdalena river region. Hitmen entered her home in the municipality of San Pablo (southern Bolívar) and assassinated her by several gunshot wounds right outside her home.^v

Finally, on the night of March 25 armed men attempted to assassinate Jhon Restrepo, a well-known LGBTI leader in Medellín and director of the Corporación Casa Diversa in the Comuna 8 sector of the city. For several years Jhon led the LGBTI Roundtable in Comuna 8 of Medellín, until 2011, when the Roundtable fell apart due to continuous attacks by armed groups, who opposed any visibility for LGBTI persons in the sector. Recently the group was recognized as the first LGBTI subject to receive collective reparations in the country and resumed its activities as Corporación Casa Diversa. Nonetheless, they began to receive new threats, and the night of March 25, after Jhon finished making deliveries of groceries to residents of the neighborhood so that they would have basic supplies during the national quarantine, three armed men went to his house and attacked him with a bladed weapon, stabbing him five times.^{vi} His case suggests that attacking community and social leaders during this period also has a detrimental impact on the communities because they and the organizations they work with are actively engaged in providing support to the most vulnerable populations during the quarantine.

The aggravated social risk due to the COVID-19 pandemic has also had a negative impact on former combatants who signed the Final Peace Agreement. Such is the case of Albeiro Antonio Gallego Mesa in the former Territorial Space for Training and Reincorporation (set up under the peace accords) in the municipality of La Macarena, department of Meta.^{vii} Three days earlier the assassination of two other signers of the peace accords was reported in San Vicente del Caguán (department of Caquetá); the ex-combatants killed were Inel Flores Forero and Belle Ester Carrillo Leal.^{viii}

These crimes suggest that the risks to social leaders have increased now that the attention of the Colombian and the international community is focused on containing the health emergency brought about by the spread of COVID-19, and it is possible that these circumstances are being used to go forward with plans to exterminate social leaders and human rights defenders in Colombia.

These incidents sound an alert and illustrate the need for public opinion and the international community to raise their voices, calling on the Colombian authorities to contain the plans to assassinate social leaders and human rights defenders that have been implemented since the beginning of the peace process. The patterns of the attacks that have taken place during the coronavirus preventive isolation measures, as well as other attacks perpetrated by the paramilitary forces who call themselves the “Águilas Negras” (“Black Eagles”), are evidence of intense prior monitoring of the leaders in which they are located in their homes, workplaces, and social networks, actions which, according to various sources, involve state intelligence agencies that take it upon themselves to threaten the leaders^{ix}, while the assassinations are always carried out by “armed civilians,” “unknown persons,” “hooded persons,” or “indeterminate perpetrators.”^x This situation could worsen during the national quarantine due to the isolation of the leaders in a single place for many days.

For these reasons, the Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos concluded its press release in response to the assassination of its spokesperson Marco Rivadeneira by making *“an appeal to the international community to join us in demanding that the Iván Duque administration carry out its obligations set forth in international human rights instruments and reinforced by the Peace Agreement to provide full guarantees for the work of persons who defend human rights, and to impede and contain the enemies of peace such that the emergency situation impacting Colombia and the world not be used to continue wiping out social leaders in the territories and persons and communities that clamor for and defend human rights.”*^{xi}

ⁱ Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos (CCEEU). *La Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos, rechaza el asesinato de su dirigente en el Putumayo Marco Rivadeneira*. At: <https://coeuropa.org.co/la-coordinacion-colombia-europa-estados-unidos-rechaza-el-asesinato-de-su-dirigente-en-el-putumayo-marco-rivadeneira/>

ⁱⁱ Colombian death squads exploiting coronavirus lockdown to kill activists. In: The Guardian. March 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/colombian-groups-exploiting-coronavirus-lockdown-to-kill-activists>

ⁱⁱⁱ Grupos armados aprovechan cuarentena para asesinar a líderes sociales: The Guardian. Pulzo. March 24, 2020. At: <https://www.pulzo.com/mundo/grupos-armados-aprovechan-cuarentena-para-matar-lideres-sociales-the-guardian-PP867787>

^{iv} “Asesinan a dos líderes indígenas cuando cumplían aislamiento por COVID-19”. Caracol Radio. March 25, 2020. At: <https://noticias.caracoltv.com/coronavirus-covid-19/asesinan-dos-lideres-indigenas-cuando-cumplan-aislamiento-por-covid-19-ie214>

^v “Asesinan a la lideresa Carlota Salinas Pérez en Bolívar antes de la cuarentena.” In: El Heraldo. March 25, 2020. <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/asesinan-la-lideresa-carlota-salinas-perez-en-bolivar-antes-de-la-cuarentena-712263>

^{vi} Public statement by Corporación Casa Diversa, March 26, 2020.

^{vii} “Asesinan a excombatiente de las Farc en Meta.” At: Radio Nacional de Colombia. March 22, 2020. <https://www.radionacional.co/noticias/asesinato-excombatiente-meta>

^{viii} Dos ex combatientes de las FARC fueron asesinados en Colombia. Notas. March 19, 2020. At: <https://notasperiodismopopular.com.ar/2020/03/19/dos-excombatientes-farc-asesinados-colombia/>

^{ix} “Las ‘Águilas Negras’ son una corporación por fuera de la ley, compuesta por funcionarios armados del Estado.” Debate on Paramilitarism in the Senate of the Republic. June 5, 2019. Senator Gustavo Petro. At: <https://twitter.com/Alonrop/status/1136352534728237056>

^x CINEP. “Violencia Camuflada. La Base Social en Riesgo. Informe Anual de DD.HH en Colombia 2018.” 2019. At: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/node/188302>

^{xi} CCEEU. *Op. cit.*