

Justice for Colombia Supporter Newsletter Spring 2021

FOR PEACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



The global pandemic and the human rights crisis have made the past year extremely challenging for Colombia

(© United Nations)



Mothers of some of the at least 6,402 people murdered by the Colombian military during Álvaro Uribe's government

(© Revista DC)

Newsletter #7 – Spring 2021

The devastating impact of the pandemic and the escalating human rights crisis have resulted in Colombia's most challenging period since the 2016 peace agreement. With livelihoods disappearing **due to COVID-19**, trade unions are demanding worker protection and economic support for struggling families. When Colombia belatedly rolled out the vaccine in February 2021, more than 50,000 people had died of COVID-19.

Calls for an urgent response to the pandemic accompany long-running demands over inequality, human rights and peace, which prior to the pandemic gave rise to Colombia's **largest protests in decades**. Led by trade unions and social movements, the 'National Strike' movement staged fresh mobilisations in late 2020, while indigenous communities based in southwest Colombia **mobilised to Bogota en masse** over the human rights abuses and environmental destruction impacting regions such as Cauca and Nariño. The music and colourful banners on display at such times are in stark contrast to the state's repressive approach to public protest.

Colombian human rights organisations registered over 300 murders of social activists and 90 massacres in 2020 *alone*. Additionally, by February 2021, 258 FARC former combatants had been murdered in the roughly four years since entering the peace process. The United Nations says the agreement's security measures have not been implemented and are 'long overdue'. Colombia remains the world's most dangerous country for trade unionists, with at least **18 murdered in 2020**. The same is true for environmental defenders, with killings leaping from 25 in 2018 to 64 the following year.

Unfortunately, certain officials, such as former Attorney General Nestor Martínez, have appeared more focused on discrediting the peace process than implementing it. While in office, Martínez allegedly conspired to falsely incriminate FARC peace negotiators in drugs trafficking. Meanwhile, the JEP transitional justice court **found that the military murdered** at least 6,402 civilians between 2002 and 2008, during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe. The JEP also brought charges against several FARC leaders for their roles in hostage-taking and kidnapping.

With Colombia's largest military and trade partner now under the Biden administration, the US has **called for implementation** of the peace agreement. The Trump government's parting shot was to designate Cuba – a guarantor to the peace process – as a 'sponsor of terrorism' over its refusal to extradite peace negotiators from Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla movement. This would set a dangerous precedent for future peace talks anywhere in the world. 'Cuba has been a key and dedicated actor in terms of its support for peace in Colombia,' **said a JFC statement**.

Finally, Colombia is beginning to look ahead to presidential elections in 2022, with cautious optimism from trade unions and human rights organisations after pro-peace candidates performed strongly in the last regional and local elections. Millions will be hoping that Colombia can overcome the challenges it faces to build a genuine stable and lasting peace. Failure to do so would be a tragedy.

Justice for Colombia



Peace Process



We recently published our latest report on the peace process. [Click here to download or read the report.](#)

*Indigenous communities mobilise
in defence of peace, human rights
and the environment
(© AN Red)*

Advances:

- The vast majority of FARC former combatants remain in the peace process, with thousands enrolled on education and vocational programmes. However, many are still waiting to receive necessary resources and funds to develop sustainable projects that will provide livelihoods moving ahead.
- The JEP transitional justice court released findings that the army murdered 6,402 civilians to present them as guerrillas killed in combat between 2002 and 2008, during the government of Álvaro Uribe. Victims' families hope the findings will finally reveal the truth around the so-called 'False Positives' scandal.
- In a welcome shift from the previous US government's lack of support, the new Biden administration has expressed support for full implementation of the peace agreement and for the JEP's mandate to be respected.

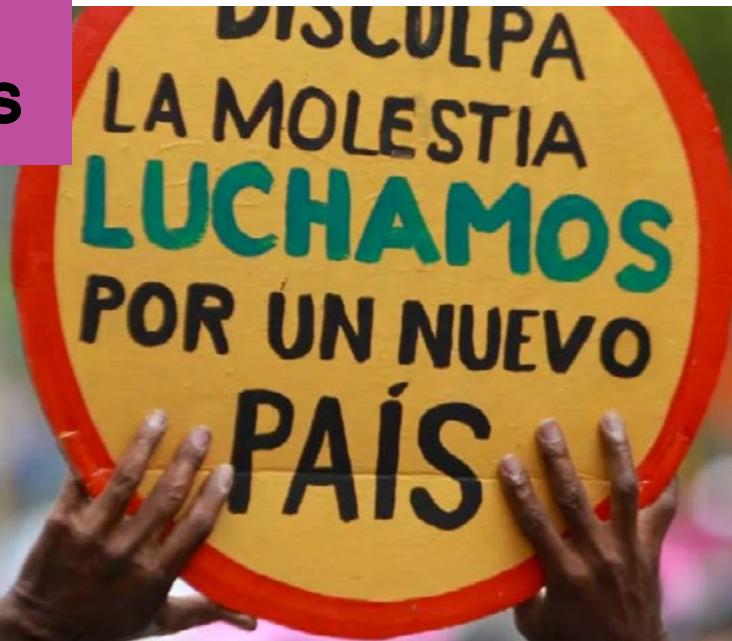
Setbacks:

- FARC former combatants face terrible violence. On New Year's Day, Colombia [reached the grim milestone](#) of 250 FARC former combatants murdered since the agreement. [JEP magistrates summoned ministers](#) to explain the government's ineffective response to the violence.
- There are difficulties in the illicit crop substitution programmes. Although the agreement stipulates voluntary removal, the army is still removing crops by force, provoking protests in which soldiers have killed peasant farmers. The government also wants to reintroduce aerial chemical spraying despite the harm it causes the environment and public health.
- The outgoing Trump administration designated Cuba as a 'sponsor of terrorism' after Cuba rejected demands to extradite ELN guerrilla peace negotiators. 'If a country risks being placed on a terrorism list as a result of facilitating peace efforts, it could set a negative precedent for international peace efforts,' said the foreign minister of Norway, which along with Cuba is a guarantor to the peace process.

 [Watch JFC's short film](#)
about FARC former guerrillas
in the peace process.



Trade Unions



Worker rights under threat

Colombia's largest trade union centre, the CUT, say legislation drafted in response to the pandemic will further erode worker rights and job security. Trade unions also accuse the government of prioritising big business over the needs of the population. More than five million people have lost their livelihoods, with 'informal' workers, such as street vendors, carers and domestic staff, particularly affected.

Deadliest country for trade unionists

At least 18 trade unionists were killed in 2020, while two teachers were murdered on New Year's Day 2021. Education International, which represents around 30 million educational workers in 170 countries, criticised the Colombian government over 'complicit silence' regarding the violence. Colombia is the world's most dangerous country for trade unionists, with the EENS trade union organisation registering 3,240 murders between 1971 and 2018.

'Sorry for the bother, we are fighting for a new country'

*Trade unions have led the largest protests in decades
(© Diario El Popular)*

Supporting teachers and students

The FECODE teachers union says the government must do more to support teachers and students in the pandemic. Teachers are under pressure to return to classrooms despite unsafe conditions, while many students lack necessary resources for home schooling: around 75% of rural students and 40% of urban students are without internet access at home. FECODE has added a comprehensive pandemic response to long-running demands around conditions, pay and investment in public schools.



Human Rights

*Security forces have been implicated
in human rights abuses against civilians
(© Alerta Bogota)*

Most violent year since peace agreement

Human rights organisations registered more than 300 social activists murdered in 2020, making it the most violent year since the peace agreement. Indigenous leaders, human rights defenders and trade unionists were heavily targeted. Colombia is also the world's most dangerous country for environmental defenders, with murders rising from 25 in 2018 to 64 in 2019.

Police killings of protesters

A number of police officers face trial over the alleged killings of several people during protests against police brutality in September. Social media footage showed police firing into crowds of people and attacking civilians, with up to 13 people killed in the violence. Bogota's mayor accused police of 'shooting indiscriminately' at people and promised justice to victims' families.

Shocking rise in massacres

There were 90 massacres in 2020, approaching three times the previous year's figure. Among the most shocking cases were the murder of five teenagers in Cali and the killing of eight young people at a party in Nariño. Violence has continued into 2021, with 31 social activists killed and at least 14 massacres by early March.



Jayder Quintana,
trade unionist,
murdered October 2020



Rosa Amalia Mendoza,
FARC former combatant,
murdered December 2020

Concerns in House of Lords

Britain's House of Lords [held a debate on Colombia](#) which addressed multiple concerns, including alleged attempts by the Attorney General to incriminate FARC peace negotiators and undermine the peace process. Concerns were also raised regarding attacks on the transitional justice system, violence against social activists, and whether the British government would address human rights violations committed by Colombian security forces.

New JFC report on peace process

The [third report of the Justice for Colombia Peace Monitor](#) was launched in November. The report identified important advances as well as concerns for the future of the peace agreement, such as those detailed in this newsletter. The JFC Peace Monitor is a trade union-funded initiative to provide international support for the peace process.

Juanita Villamil

**Student, Feminist Activist
and Human Rights Defender**

“Historically, Colombia has been badly hit by state violence and human rights violations. People are persecuted for being human rights defenders, students, workers or because they are women. JFC's important work helps make this situation visible to the international community. International support can apply pressure on the Colombian government to fully meet its obligations to the peace process, as well as its agreements with indigenous movements, peasants, students, workers and others. As young people, we hope our country's future will be one of peace with social justice. We work every day to achieve this goal and it fills us with pride to know that people around the world support us.”

JFC News



Demanding justice for Jayder

British and Irish politicians reacted to the murder of 18-year-old trade unionist Jayder Quintana, who they had met on a JFC delegation to Colombia in May 2019. Dan Carden MP [asked if the British government](#) would raise Jayder's murder with its Colombian counterpart, while Sinn Fein senator Paul Gavan [said the Colombian government](#) was 'watching on as people are slaughtered'.

JFC is available to take part in online events and give presentations to trade unions, organisations and solidarity meetings. If you'd like JFC to speak at an upcoming meeting, please email info@justiceforcolombia.org





for **Peace** and **Social Justice**



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