



Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace

Latin America Report N°82 | 6 October 2020

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? Colombia's grassroots leaders face a rising tide of attacks as they campaign for conflict-stricken communities' rights. Violence targeting these activists has climbed despite the 2016 peace accord's pledges to safeguard civil society. COVID-19 has exacerbated insecurity for these leaders as armed groups have exploited movement restrictions to consolidate control.

Why does it matter? Social leaders are among the most fervent advocates for the peace deal and the staunchest defenders of conflict victims. Attacks upon them weaken the 2016 accord and its base of popular support, exposing the state's grave difficulties in protecting communities from vested interests with violent designs.

What should be done? The government should ensure that perpetrators of attacks face judicial punishment and prioritise community safety, particularly when conducting military operations. It should broaden demobilisation programs for armed groups and, over the long term, carry out rural reforms to loosen the grip of illicit economies.

Executive Summary

The 2016 peace accord between the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian state promised a new era, but people at the front line of conflict have yet to see it. Local activists, commonly referred to as social leaders, are the accord's most ardent backers, defending human rights, access to land and economic development in their communities. Yet, while the deal provides for their protection, many of these leaders now live in fear. At least 415 have been killed and hundreds more harassed or forcibly displaced since 2016. For many more, the price of security is silence. Government efforts to restrict movement to contain the COVID-19 pandemic go unheeded by non-state armed groups, which have moved to expand their control, pushing the tide of violence even higher. Without urgent steps to relieve economic desperation in rural areas, strengthen prosecution of culprits and modify the government's combative and often counterproductive approach to internal security, the endeavour to create lasting peace in Colombia could be stripped of its most important base of support.

Assassinations of social leaders are a tragedy in and of themselves, but they also underline the fragility of the peace accord and the range of saboteurs who oppose it. The vast majority of killings occur in areas long affected by conflict, such as Antioquia, Cauca and Chocó. Figures kept by prosecutors suggest that 59 per cent of murders can be attributed to identifiable armed groups, 39 per cent to unknown individuals or bands, and 2 per cent to military officers. Emboldened to campaign and denounce abuses following the 2016 accord, community figures have since found targets painted on their backs. Assassinations and threats also convey messages to the collective: to stay quiet, move home, stop advocating for certain rights, or stay within the invisible borders demarcated by armed groups.

Dissidents from the demobilised FARC, fighters from the guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN) and various criminal groups, some of them outgrowths of disbanded paramilitary forces, are prominent among the suspects in these crimes. In many cases, these competing groups regard social leaders as obstacles to illicit business – notably, coca production and cocaine trafficking – or their plans to coerce communities' allegiance. Other murders point to the role of shadowy interests in the state, local business or the armed forces. Certain social leaders who file reports after receiving death threats fear that officials who should be protecting them are in league with criminals. Others worry that enhanced security details make them more obvious targets. Almost all express their frustration at navigating the government's impenetrable maze of bureaucracy to seek help.

Two successive governments – first led by President Juan Manuel Santos and now by President Iván Duque – have struggled to arrest the rise in violence, an issue so politically important it featured high on the list of grievances of a mass protest movement that paralysed many Colombian cities in late 2019. The core of President Duque's response has been to provide physical protection such as armoured cars and bodyguards to at-risk individuals, while using military force to combat the armed groups that reportedly carry out most of these killings. Nearly 5,000 social leaders benefit from these protection schemes, which have undoubtedly saved lives. Yet state

security agents often require the leaders under their protection to move to urban areas and leave their communities, effectively ending their local leadership roles.

More importantly, the government has yet to properly diagnose the socio-economic ills that underpin these attacks. Duque's government is convinced that destroying illicit business and militarily weakening armed groups will allow social leaders to live and work in peace. But numerous activists observe that enhanced forced eradication of coca and intensified military operations against armed groups actually worsen conditions for social leaders and endanger post-conflict communities. No armed group in Colombia is now powerful enough to battle the state militarily; when their interests are threatened, these outfits retaliate against local civilians – and particularly leaders who vocally oppose their sway.

The COVID-19 pandemic increases the situation's urgency. For close to six months, Colombia restricted internal travel to limit the virus's spread, leaving many far-flung communities isolated. Armed groups have taken advantage of the government's distraction to tighten their grip on territory, imposing strict social controls, such as curfews, under the guise of quarantines, commandeering the distribution of food supplies and threatening anyone thought to be contagious.

Even amid these troubles, the government could find a better prevention and mitigation approach. Rural reforms mandated in the 2016 peace accord lay out the best long-term path toward ending violence by encouraging legal economic alternatives for farmers. In the short term, Bogotá should undertake a review of how it might protect more communities and groups in addition to individuals. It should also broaden the number of state institutions that can receive reports of threats to leaders. It should bolster judicial prosecution of these crimes, including of the support and complicity networks in which perpetrators operate – some of which may reach into parts of the state. The Colombian military should consider potential blowback against local civilians before launching operations against armed groups. Finally, although the government has made progress in providing additional routes to demobilisation, it needs to do much more to present armed groups with incentives to hand over their weapons.

Targeted violence meted out in Colombia's rural or urban peripheries is not a novelty. But in the wake of a landmark peace accord, daily threats and attacks faced by social activists are eroding the belief that the country can turn the page on conflict. Protecting these leaders, deterring their enemies and ensuring their communities' safety is at the heart of security policy and should be the first line of defence.

Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 6 October 2020

Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace

I. Introduction

Lethal violence against social leaders is the most conspicuous failing in Colombia's struggles to implement its 2016 peace accord. As prominent and vocal figures in their localities, these leaders are among the strongest advocates for the deal that demobilised the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and aspired to bring peace, security and equity to the country's conflict-ridden rural areas. But targeted threats and killings have sought to quash these ambitions: at least 415 social leaders have been assassinated since January 2016.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, including a nationwide lockdown that lasted from 25 March to 1 September, this toll appears to have risen at an even faster rate. The government confirmed eleven murders, with a further 27 cases pending verification, between 1 April and 30 June.² Local civil society, meanwhile, documents an 85 per cent increase in homicides of social leaders during the first half of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.³

Vilified by both armed groups and on occasion by state security forces during the country's decades of conflict, Colombia's political, social and labour representatives were promised a radically improved future after the peace agreement. The accord, forged over four years of talks between the FARC and government representatives in Cuba, acknowledged that activists who draw attention to social injustices and campaign to remedy them have faced a deadly (and largely spurious) stigma of association with leftist guerrillas.⁴ In response, the agreement promised safe conditions for social activists and "the exercise of political opposition".⁵ It also vowed to develop impoverished rural areas, including by extending state services and institutions.⁶

¹ "Informe sobre victimización a personas defensoras de derechos humanos", Attorney General's Office, 2 September 2020.

² "Informe de Homicidios: Contra Líderes Sociales y Defensores/as de Derechos Humanos en Colombia", Presidential Commission for Human Rights and International Affairs, 1 April-30 June 2020, p. 40.

³ "Se Incrementa la Letalidad de la Violencia contra Líderes Sociales, políticos, y comunales durante el primer semestre de 2020 MOE", Electoral Observation Mission, 22 September 2020.

⁴ Daniel Pécaut, "Una lucha armada al servicio del statu quo social y político", in Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, *Contribución al Entendimiento del Conflicto Armado en Colombia* (2015), pp. 48-49.

⁵ The peace agreement's second point addresses political reform, including guarantees for political opponents and social organisations. Point 2.1.1.1 discusses guarantees for "the exercise of political opposition". Point 2.1.2.2 extends "[s]ecurity guarantees for leaders of social organisations and movements and human rights activists", while point 2.2.1 offers "[g]uarantees for social organisations and movements". Together, these components aimed to end the use of violence as a political weapon with a combination of better early warning, protection, monitoring and investigation of crimes. "Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace", November 2016.

⁶ Ibid. The peace agreement's first point addresses comprehensive rural reform, including pledges to improve land access, availability of public services, security, human rights guarantees, local participation, food security and sustainable development.

Violence against these leaders, however, has intensified in many of the areas slated for increased public investment and attention after the peace deal.⁷ Assailants have slain hundreds of activists who convinced their communities to sign onto the peace deal and assist in its implementation, or who campaigned, against powerful legal or illegal vested interests, for land restitution, victims' rights, ethnic autonomy and the environment – all policies reaffirmed in the 2016 agreement.⁸ These targeted killings often have the effect of silencing a community and ensuring its submission – either to an armed group or to the aforementioned interests, which historically have used similar tactics to quell resistance.⁹

One thing did change with the accord: far from being seen as a regrettable but inevitable part of a wider conflagration, killings of community leaders are now a critical metric of the peace accord's success or failure in the public eye. Hundreds of murders of social leaders have shed light on the fact that violence remains the tool of choice to coerce poor communities. Public pressure on the government to protect these activists has been relentless, including in the street protests that engulfed Colombia in late 2019.¹⁰ One of President Iván Duque's first actions upon taking office in 2018 was to sign a "Pact for Life" with the Inspector General's Office, promising a streamlined and more effective state response.¹¹

But Colombia's extreme political polarisation means that both diagnoses and proposed remedies for the problem are fiercely disputed. Conservatives, including the Duque government, see all forms of non-state violence as stemming from pervasive lawlessness.¹² Duque has deployed the military – which for decades has held a monopoly on internal security – to troubled zones and directed them to root out the drug economy, including through forced coca eradication and attacks on armed groups involved in trafficking.¹³ For the opposition, however, and much of civil society, the killings result from the government's failure to fulfil the peace accord, due both to its initial resistance to the deal, which it never got over, and to the persistence of para-

⁷ See Figure 3 on p. 7 below.

⁸ Previous legislation and legal rulings addressed a number of the structural issues cited in the peace agreement. For example, Law 1448 of 2011, or the Victims' Law, established rights for those who suffered in the conflict. Article 329 of Colombia's 1991 constitution, meanwhile, enshrines the right of indigenous autonomy in designated territories.

⁹ Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín and Jenniffer Vargas Reina, "Agrarian Elite Participation in Colombia's Civil War", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2017), p. 744.

¹⁰ Protesters cited assassinations of social leaders as one of their many grievances during demonstrations that shut down Colombia's major cities intermittently from 21 November to the end of 2019. "Paro nacional: el rechazo a los asesinatos de líderes sociales", *El Espectador*, 21 February 2020.

¹¹ The pact promised, among other things, to reform and streamline protection programs, work more closely with communities, improve investigations into crimes, and rely on the peace deal's mechanisms to address the root causes of violence. "Pacto por la vida y la protección de los líderes sociales y personas defensoras de derechos humanos", 23 August 2018.

¹² Crisis Group Latin America Report N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017; and "Crucial Reforms Languish as Colombia Seeks to Consolidate Peace", Crisis Group EU Watch List 2019 – Second Update, 17 July 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, Colombian military officer, March, April and May 2020. Colombia has increased the number of manual forced eradication teams from 32 to nearly 100, with a goal of reaching 150. Remarks of Deputy Defence Minister Diana Abaunza at a conference, Instituto Ciencia Política, Bogotá, 2 December 2019.

military-style organisations with alleged ties to security forces.¹⁴ In this view, the official strategy gets it backwards: the government should improve socio-economic conditions in the countryside that drive people to illicit livelihoods, as well as support existing self-protection mechanisms, such as the indigenous guard, an unarmed, locally managed corps that protects indigenous areas.

This report is based on over 90 interviews with social leaders, senior government and military officers, local authorities and residents, and staffers of civil society groups and international monitoring organisations. Crisis Group conducted fieldwork in Bogotá, Cauca, Córdoba and Soacha before and during March 2020, as well as remotely in Amazonas, Antioquia and Guaviare after the national COVID-19 lockdown.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, adviser to opposition senator, Bogotá, January 2020.

II. The Vulnerability of Social Leaders

A. *Competing Definitions*

There is no agreed-upon definition of a social leader, and controversy surrounds how broad the category should be. Political debates regarding attacks on leaders often echo the dispute over the label's scope. The Duque government lists 23 categories of social leadership that are eligible for protection.¹⁵ According to this approach, social leaders include members of local community councils as well as advocates for causes such as human rights, ethnic autonomy, environmental protection and rural reform. Yet officials also argue that far too many citizens are considered social leaders, robbing the label of meaning while inflating the numbers eligible for protection.¹⁶ The Attorney General's Office, which is responsible for investigating crimes against social leaders, prefers a narrower definition that includes only human rights defenders, ie, those advocating for the stipulations of the 1999 UN Declaration on Human Rights.¹⁷ Using these metrics, the government insists that homicides of leaders dropped by 25 per cent in 2019 compared to 2018.¹⁸

Other bodies such as the state Ombudsman's office (which is responsible for overseeing civil and human rights in Colombia) embrace broader definitions.¹⁹ Metrics also vary widely among civil society organisations, which tend to rely on community recognition to decide who is a leader. Based on these alternative definitions, violence against leaders is more widespread than official statistics indicate.²⁰ Government and civil society bodies also disagree as to how and whether to include in their tallies violence that may have motivations beyond targeting human rights work, such as personal debts or alleged local disputes. This issue is far from easy to resolve, because many leaders operate in areas dominated by armed groups and/or illicit economies. One example where the categorisation of violence proves complex would be an attack on a social leader who is also a coca farmer and advocates for producers' rights.

Rival definitions generate clear variations in death tolls, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, although the trend lines in violence are largely the same: rates increased between 2016 and 2018, with a slight fall in 2019.

¹⁵ "Informe de Homicidios Contra Líderes Sociales y Defensores de Derechos Humanos 2016-19", Presidential Commission for Human Rights and International Affairs, November 2019.

¹⁶ "In Colombia, you could have 60,000 leaders just including the members of the [Community Action Committees]. ... It's very hard to protect these people in areas that are complex and difficult to access". Crisis Group interview, official, Interior Ministry, Bogotá, March 2020.

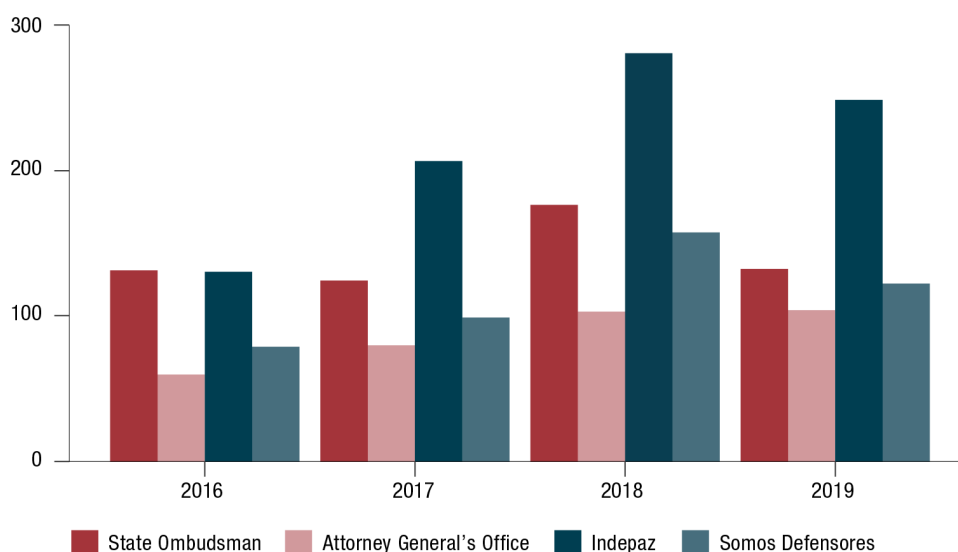
¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, official, Attorney General's Office, Bogotá, November 2019.

¹⁸ "Presidente Duque reiteró que detrás de los asesinatos de líderes sociales están el narcotráfico, la extracción ilegal de minerales y los grupos armados organizados", press release, Colombian Presidency, 9 January 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Ombudsman, Bogotá, January 2020.

²⁰ In 2019, the civil society organisation Instituto de Estudios Para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz) reported 250 social leader assassinations. The government, in contrast, cites the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights figure of 107 killed – even though the UN acknowledges that this number is an underestimate. See "Con 250 asesinatos, termina un difícil año para los líderes sociales", *El Tiempo*, 30 December 2019; and "Al menos 555 líderes sociales fueron asesinados en Colombia desde 2016", EFE, 16 January 2020.

Figure 1: Assassinations of Social Leaders by Source, 2016-2019



Source: Data from the State Ombudsman, the Attorney General's Office, Indepaz, and Somos Defensores. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

B. *The Geography of Violence against Social Leaders*

Killings of social leaders have occurred in 29 of Colombia's 32 departments (as it calls its provinces). Just three regions – Antioquia, Cauca and Norte de Santander – account for over half of these assassinations.²¹ Violent incidents are clustered in places where more than one armed group is jostling for control, along key drug trafficking corridors and in areas with natural resources.²² In this sense, violence is a continuation of, rather than a departure from, the past: many killings take place in areas that have historically witnessed the highest levels of conflict.²³ The map in Figure 2 below shows that the distribution of violence aligns closely with the 170 municipalities designated in the peace agreement for post-conflict Territorially Focused Development

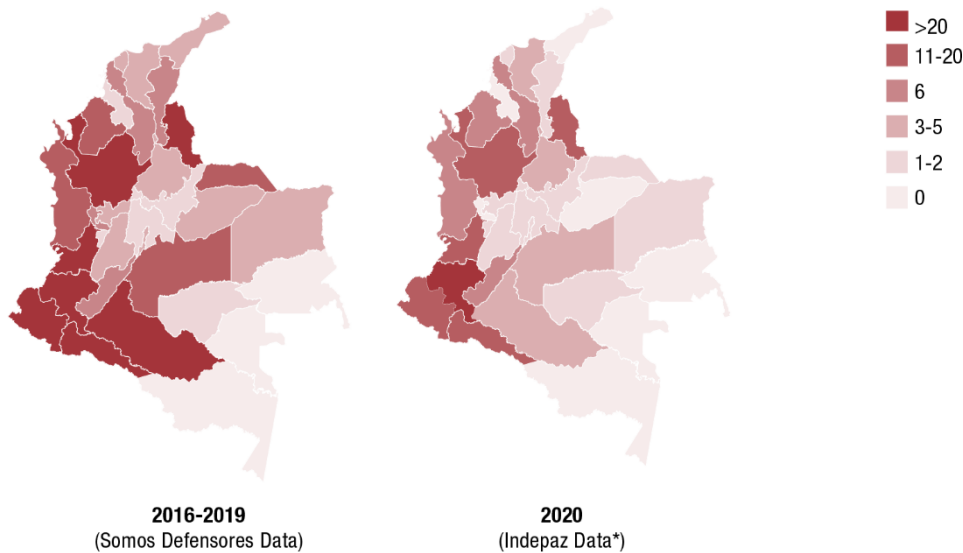
²¹ Data from Programa Somos Defensores annual reports.

²² Broadly speaking, coca grown in Colombia's interior is trafficked abroad along one of three routes: from southern provinces such as Caquetá and Putumayo to the Pacific coast; from Antioquia and southern Córdoba to either the Atlantic, the Pacific or the Venezuelan border; and from Meta and Guaviare across the border into Venezuela. The three departments most affected by social leader violence fall along those trafficking routes: Cauca along the Pacific coast, Antioquia in the heartland and Norte de Santander along the eastern border. All three departments are also major sites for mining and natural resource extraction. Crisis Group Report, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, op. cit.

²³ This analysis is shared by the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia: "The risk is concentrated in areas where one or more illegal armed groups are present, whether these groups coexist or are embroiled in disputes over territorial control. Risk is also present in territories where strategies like forced eradication or the National Integral Substitution Program are being implemented to reduce illicit crops. Demand for access to, as well as defense of, territories also constitute risk scenarios". "Twenty-seventh Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Organization of American States Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OAS)", Organization of American States, 30 October 2019.

Programs (PDETs): 60 per cent of assassinations occur in just these areas.²⁴ These municipalities were selected for their extreme levels of poverty, high historical impact of conflict, weak institutional capacity and presence of illicit economic activity.

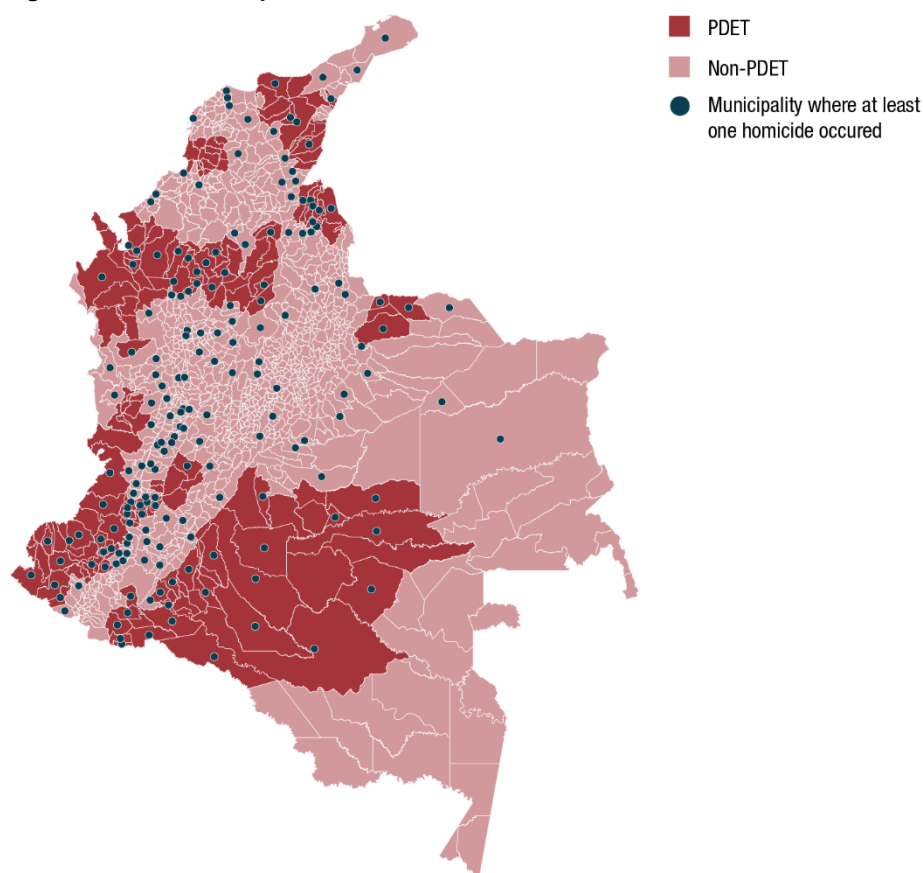
Figure 2: Killings of Social Leaders by Department



Source: Data from Somos Defensores and Indepaz. * As of 16 September 2020. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

²⁴ The disproportionate number of social leader killings in PDET municipalities, many of which were previously under FARC control, aligns with findings showing that peace deal implementation increased killings of social leaders in former FARC strongholds. See Mouno Prem, Andrés F. Rivera, Dario A. Romero and Juan F. Vargas, “Killing Social Leaders for Territorial Control: The Unintended Consequences of Peace”, working paper, University of Rosario, 2018.

Figure 3: PDET Municipalities and Social Leader Assassinations, 2017-2019



Source: Data from the Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural and Somos Defensores. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

C. The Impact of Attacks on Social Leaders

Attacks on social leaders have a deeper impact than everyday crime. They signal an intolerance of speaking out, an antagonism toward specific leaders' causes or communities, an intent to terrorise or all of the above. Assailants target social leaders as a way to pressure the community, in the knowledge that a particular homicide will underscore the pervasiveness of their local coercive power. A women's leader from Chocó explained: "When a leader is threatened, it is a threat to the entire community. The whole community feels vulnerable".²⁵

These crimes' political significance stems at least in part from the history of assassinations throughout Colombia's conflict, including of social leaders but also of politicians (from both government and opposition), labour union officials, journalists and rural workers' representatives. For much of the second half of the 20th century, Colombian democracy operated under a two-party system that guaranteed alternation of power between liberals and conservatives.²⁶ The so-called National Front, a bipartisan agreement, effectively ended the civil war between these two sides known as La Violencia (1948-1958), but it gave way to an exclusionary status quo whose sur-

²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, social leader, June 2020.

²⁶ The pact was formalised in 1956, following eight years of violence sparked by the 1948 assassination of liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

vival depended upon preventing the rise of an opposition outside the two parties.²⁷ Both liberal and conservative governments supported tough policies against elements seeking to subvert this order. The FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) emerged in this milieu in 1964, motivated in part by awareness that they could gain access to power only by toppling the entire political system.²⁸

From the 1970s to the 1990s, civic activists and leftist political groups also became targets of the state's security complex. Governments used violence to suppress new movements, authorised military crackdowns on protests and stigmatised expressions of radical political thought. Leftist guerrillas increasingly adopted a strategy to "combine all manners of fighting", aiming to associate themselves with social movements and the democratic political opposition.²⁹ Using this ambiguity as a pretext, state and quasi-state agents resorted to deliberate attacks on civil society, most clearly in the extrajudicial killings between 1985 and 1993 of at least 3,122 members of the political party Unión Patriótica, formed by FARC supporters.³⁰ Journalists, labour leaders and advocates for small farmers faced a similar spate of violence, much of it from paramilitary groups allied in shadowy ways with the military.³¹ Colombia's political system started opening to the opposition only after the adoption of a new constitution in 1991, and violence against politicians, journalists and labour leaders has declined since the early 2000s.

Assassinations of social leaders are the exception to this downward trend. Conflict experts began tracking this category of killings around 2009, although the issue had attracted legal attention before.³² Between 1998 and 2011, a series of Supreme Court rulings – largely the result of citizen petitions (*tutelas*) – established the state's responsibility to protect leaders of particular communities, ethnicities and victims'

²⁷ For a history of political opposition in Colombia, see Juan Fernando Londoño O., *Oposición Política en Colombia* (Bogotá, 2016), pp. 51-92.

²⁸ Daniel Pécaut, *Guerra Contra la Sociedad* (Bogotá, 2001).

²⁹ A prime example was the urban M-19 guerrilla movement that emerged in 1974 and inspired other insurgencies to emulate its *modus operandi*. The M-19 "sought to have its members avoid assuming a 'separatist' vision (in other words, a view centred on armed organisations), but rather to align themselves with popular and student movements". Otty Patiño Hormanza, Vera Grabe Loewenherz and Mauricio García-Durán, "El camino del M-19 de la lucha armada a la democracia: una búsqueda de cómo hacer política en sintonía con el país", *De La Insurgencia a la Democracia* (Bogotá, 2009), p. 51.

³⁰ Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory documented 4,153 victims from Unión Patriótica, including 3,122 members assassinated and 544 forcibly disappeared. "Todo Pasó Frente a Nuestros Ojos: El Genocidio de la Unión Patriótica, 1984-2002", National Centre for Historical Memory, August 2018.

³¹ In confessions after their demobilisation, paramilitary groups organised under the umbrella *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) shared with the justice system their "horror lists": Excel documents that detail who was killed and how. "¡Basta Ya!", National Centre of Historical Memory, 2013, p. 43; and "La lista del holocausto paramilitar en Norte de Santander", *Verdad Abierta*, 22 July 2014.

³² Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Ombudsman, April 2020. Somos Defensores was the first civil society organisation to systematically record acts of violence against social leaders, beginning with its 2009 annual report. "Sistema de Información sobre Agresiones a Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Colombia: Informe 2009", Programa Somos Defensores, 2010.

groups.³³ The 2011 Victims' Law created the first state institutions charged with attending to populations designated as at risk from conflict, while the 2016 peace agreement was the first to spell out the state's responsibility to protect social leaders. The accord stipulates that the state will provide security and political guarantees for human rights and civil society organisations, including mechanisms to prevent violence, protect those in danger and follow up on cases.³⁴ Subsequent legal rulings related to social leaders have affirmed the state's responsibility to meet these commitments.³⁵

Because it recognised their importance to Colombian democracy for the first time, the peace accord also encouraged many leaders to work more openly.³⁶ Campaigns by Colombia's media, civil society, state Ombudsman and Inspector General's Office shone a spotlight on local community advocates' work.³⁷ In 2016, rates of violence toward social leaders declined in many areas. Yet by 2017, these were climbing again, particularly in rural locales.³⁸ According to profiles of those killed, the greatest share of recorded attacks since 2016 affected leaders who vocally support the peace accord and are involved in its implementation; those who push back against armed group activity; those opposed to certain economic interests, both legal and illegal; and those who advocate for ethnic groups, women or the LGBT community.³⁹

Today, violence toward social leaders takes various forms, some more visible than others. Assassinations are often the last link in a long chain of harassment and pressure, which one social leader despairingly described as "daily bread".⁴⁰ Threats often arrive by email or text message and from anonymous sources. For example, a leader might be told to move away from the area within a certain number of days or risk be-

³³ "Esta es la línea jurisprudencial que protege a líderes sociales en contextos de violencia generalizada", *Ámbito Jurídico*, 15 January 2019.

³⁴ See point 2.1.2.2 in "Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace", op. cit.

³⁵ On 10 December 2019, ten social leaders presented a *tutela* (right of petition) before the Constitutional Court arguing that violence against social leaders violated rights and responsibilities established in the 2016 peace accord. "El Derecho a Defender Derechos: Representantes de movimientos sociales y organizaciones de DDHH presentamos tutela para exigir protección de nuestros líderes sociales", DeJusticia, 10 December 2020.

³⁶ "The accord created a higher tolerance for social mobilisation. Before, this was not tolerated". Crisis Group interview, official, Ombudsman, Montería, October 2019.

³⁷ The *Procuraduría* (Inspector General's Office) leads one campaign, *Lidera la Vida*, with the goal of removing stigma and raising awareness of social leadership. A number of Colombian press outlets have run special sections or issues to highlight the work of social leaders since 2016.

³⁸ The Attorney General's Office reports that 66 per cent of killings are in rural areas, while 34 per cent are in urban areas. "Informe sobre victimización a personas defensoras de derechos humanos", op. cit.

³⁹ "Peace has encouraged leaders to participate, and they have mobilised. So, we see now leaders, victims, *campesinos*, Afro-Colombians, everybody. But this is having the reverse effect – the lack of guarantees for them means they face threats". Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, Bogotá, October 2019. See also "Personas defensoras de derechos humanos y líderes sociales en Colombia", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 6 December 2019, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Soacha, February 2020.

ing killed. Armed groups also increasingly name individuals or categories of people as targets in the pamphlets they distribute on paper or online.⁴¹

Threats also differ depending on who is being targeted and why. Women are much more likely to receive threats of sexual violence, or to see their children or family members harassed.⁴² Leaders of the LGBT community report receiving messages suggesting the need for “social cleansing”, a clear reference to violent and even murderous intentions toward them.⁴³ In addition to threats of physical harm, social leaders can face forced displacement, often through a set of tactics known as “drop by drop” (*gota a gota*). A leader in Bajo Cauca, a region including northern Antioquia and southern Córdoba, explained:

Armed groups kill people and the message is clear: leave this territory. They come in and maybe they kill someone, but everyone stays. So, they come back ten to fifteen days later and kill another person and burn his house. The message is that the population should get out of the territory.⁴⁴

⁴¹ For example, in Soacha, 22 individuals were named as prospective targets in pamphlets circulated between January and early March 2020. Crisis Group interview, local government official, Soacha, March 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, social leader, Soacha, February 2020.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, social leader, Montería, October 2019.

III. The Sources of Violence against Social Leaders

Since the peace deal, Colombia's most alarming displays of violence have increasingly been rooted in an array of local disputes, including over the spoils of illicit business and for control of communities that present an obstacle to certain political and economic interests.

A. A Fragmenting Conflict

Patterns of violence against social leaders reveal what may be the original sin in the peace accord's implementation: the state failed to fill the power void left when the FARC laid down its arms and exited its former territorial bastions, despite a persistent Colombian military presence in many of these same areas. Instead, one conflict was replaced with another as existing or new armed groups aggressively competed to control the most valuable slices of illicit economies and the communities nearby.⁴⁵

The state's inability to control former FARC territory has created a new universe of risks for social leaders as they find themselves in the crossfire of competing armed groups. In 2016, the ELN was a shrinking movement, confined to its historical strongholds in Arauca and Norte de Santander along the border with Venezuela, southern Bolívar and northern Antioquia, southern Cauca and parts of Chocó. It has since grown significantly in size and capacity and extended its geographic footprint, securing a presence along the entire Pacific coastline and much of the Venezuelan border, as well as new areas of Córdoba, Antioquia, the Atlantic coast and inside Venezuela itself.⁴⁶ The ELN reportedly enjoys greater access to high-quality weaponry and has improved its operational capabilities: "The ELN today is very different from the ELN before. They are fortifying their military structures into a real guerrilla resistance".⁴⁷

Meanwhile, at least two dozen FARC dissident groups now operate in 132 municipalities, albeit with limited ideological coherence and volatile connections to one another.⁴⁸ Despite their name, the majority of the dissident rank and file are not former FARC fighters, but rather new recruits who have joined in the last two years. One of the few prominent guerrilla leaders to have reneged on the accord, former FARC peace negotiator Iván Márquez, has attempted without great success to unify some factions through a rehashed insurgent ideology and enhanced operational coordination.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°68, *The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guerrillas*, 12 July 2018; and N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019. See also "¿Qué hacer con el ELN? Opciones para no cerrar la puerta a una salida negociada", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, January 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, MAPP/OAS official, February and August 2020.

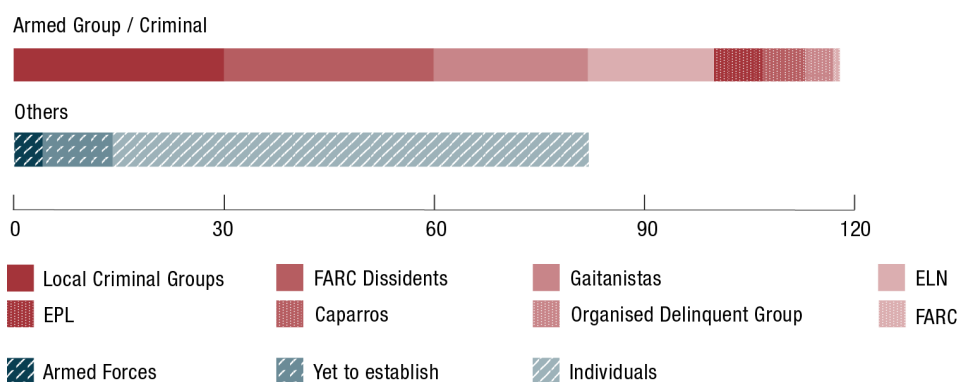
⁴⁸ A leaked military document suggests that FARC dissident factions operate in 132 of Colombia's 1,103 municipalities with 2,600 armed members. "Disidencias de las Farc duplican su número de hombres en solo 12 meses", *El Tiempo*, 31 May 2020.

⁴⁹ The vast majority of demobilised ex-FARC combatants – all but 765 of 13,202 – have not returned to fighting. Many so-called dissidents are likely fresh recruits, occasionally led by former FARC mid-level officers. Crisis Group interview, FARC ex-combatant, Cali, February 2020. "Tres

FARC dissident factions and the ELN compete for influence and markets with drug traffickers who trace their emergence and operational methods to paramilitary organisations that demobilised between 2003 and 2006.⁵⁰ In Colombia's central region, along the north Atlantic coastline and in Chocó on the Pacific coast, the Gaitanista drug cartel exerts control over a number of key trafficking routes.⁵¹ While pacts of convenience among these myriad groups are possible, each ultimately seeks to control lucrative businesses in coca, marijuana, illegal mining, extortion and human trafficking, among others.

In keeping with this fragmentation of Colombia's armed groups, data from finalised judicial investigations (see Figure 4 below) suggest that a wide range of outfits is responsible for assassinations of social leaders. The Attorney General's Office reports that as of June 2020, in the 201 cases it believes it has solved, roughly 59 per cent of perpetrators were linked to armed groups; another 39 per cent were individuals without affiliation, or who belonged to unknown groups; while 2 per cent were military personnel.⁵² State prosecutors ascribe most of the murders carried out by armed groups to FARC dissident factions and local bands without nationwide reach.

Figure 4: Assumed Perpetrators in Cases with Advanced Investigations



Source: Data from the Attorney General's Office. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

B. Raw Crime or Political Violence?

Two contrasting accounts of why social leaders are killed in such numbers have dominated Colombia's political arena, with major ramifications for public policy. Senior officials from the Duque administration insist that social leaders are killed because

años de la reincorporación de las FARC: desafíos y propuestas”, Fundación Ideas para la Paz, December 2019. On Márquez's faction, see Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°40, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, 20 September 2019.

⁵⁰ Some 38 of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia fronts, representing more than 30,000 individuals, demobilised. Nevertheless, significant criminal networks linked to former paramilitary structures continued to operate under new command or with relapsed Self-Defence members. “Retorno a La Legalidad O Reincidencia”, Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2014. “ARN en cifras”, National Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation, April 2019.

⁵¹ In addition, the Caparros are a violent Gaitanista splinter group fighting mostly in Bajo Cauca. In the country's north east, the Popular Liberation Army battles the ELN for key markets and territory. Two local groups, the Contadores and La Mafia, exert control in Nariño and Putumayo, respectively.

⁵² “Informe sobre victimización a personas defensoras de derechos humanos”, op. cit.

of unscrupulous criminal competition and the climate of violent menace that this promotes.⁵³ Attacks on social leaders show that Colombia still struggles to tame lawless behaviour. In the words of a senator from the governing party, “these are not political crimes, these are criminal crimes”.⁵⁴ Security officials serving under Duque point to personal disputes as a frequent explanation for homicides, an explanation that is not new.⁵⁵ A defence minister in the government of former President Santos affirmed that the motives for the “immense majority” of murders of social leaders are diverse, ranging from criminal disputes to quarrels between neighbours or lovers.^{56 *}

There is ample evidence indicating that violence is widely employed for illicit purposes in Colombia, that it has been normalised in certain contexts and generally goes unpunished. As one youth leader who works to prevent armed group recruitment in urban Soacha explained: “We live in circles of misery with everyone close to violence. The mentality in Colombia is that you always kill leaders or those you disagree with”.⁵⁷ In areas long marked by conflict, politicians expect violence and describe it as inevitable.⁵⁸ For those who seek to use it, violence is cheap. It can cost just a few dollars to contract a killer, who does not need to own a gun as he can easily rent one for 24 hours.⁵⁹ Even if the perpetrator is arrested, impunity prevails: only a handful of masterminds have been tried since 2016.⁶⁰

Yet the fact that violence and illegality permeate parts of Colombia does not alone explain why social leaders in particular have been killed in such alarming numbers. The answer, according to civil society organisations and members of the political opposition, is that these killings are intended to send a political signal. While there is no evidence of a singular plan to dispose of social leaders, there is a common logic to the violence: social leaders as a group are associated with fulfilment of the peace accord, ethnic and indigenous rights, land distribution and other issues politically inconvenient to armed groups and at times to various economic or security interests. Even if the perpetrators differ, it is hard to see the cases as unrelated, given the presumably shared goal in killing these grassroots leaders: to silence advocates for causes discomfiting to local powers that be.⁶¹

Not surprisingly, community activists and members of elected neighbourhood Community Action Boards are particularly likely to meet violent ends.⁶² These types

⁵³ “The majority of threats and assassinations of social leaders derive from organised armed groups that have been fed by drug trafficking and illegal mineral extraction”. Quoted from “Presidente Duque enfatiza que crímenes contra líderes sociales se deben a ataques de grupos armados organizados”, press release, Colombian Presidency, 9 March 2020.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, senator, Democratic Centre, Bogotá, January 2020.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior security official, police official, February 2020.

⁵⁶ “Asesinatos de líderes son por ‘líos de faldas’: ministro de Defensa”, *El Espectador*, 17 December 2017.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Soacha, January 2020.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, local government official, Soacha, March 2020.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, international human rights monitor, Bogotá, March 2020.

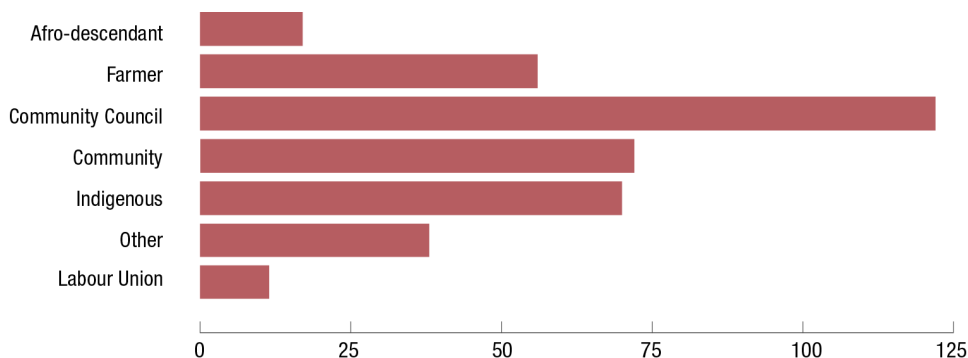
⁶⁰ Since 2016, 61 people have gone to prison for their roles in social leader homicides. At the time of writing, another 79 are facing judicial proceedings. “Informe sobre victimización a personas defensoras de derechos humanos”, Attorney General’s Office, op. cit.

⁶¹ Gabriel Rojas Andrade, “El homicidio de líderes sociales es un fenómeno sistemático y macrocriminal”, *Cero Setenta*, 15 January 2015.

⁶² Data from Programa Somos Defensores annual reports.

of leaders campaign for their communities' welfare in ways that may conflict with the economic or political designs of powerful interests: "Because of the role they play in neighbourhoods, community leaders are the first people armed groups try to silence – either by paying them off or killing them".⁶³ Many of those killed worked on issues related to the legacy and persistence of armed conflict and the implementation of the peace accord in their localities, while others campaigned for residents' access to vital services, land rights and environmental protection. Advocates for indigenous, Afro-descendant and small-scale farming communities have also been murdered.

Figure 5: Assassinations of Social Leaders by Type of Leadership, 2017-2019



Source: Data from Somos Defensores. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

The two explanations for attacks on social leaders overlap in acknowledging that the killings are the result of highly local disputes with certain significant common features. Where they differ is in the government's focus on the killers' criminal motivations, instead of the victims' political activism. This difference in emphasis generates starkly different arguments as to how the state should respond. While the government has concentrated on providing protection schemes for individuals and attacking armed groups via military operations, social leaders and many civil society organisations demand policy interventions that address the reasons why, in their view, leaders are targeted in the first place. Above all, they point to the need for full implementation of the peace agreement and the creation of conditions where leaders can speak out on behalf of their communities without fear of violent retribution.⁶⁴

C. *The Coca Economy*

There is a clear link between efforts to replace coca with other crops and attacks upon coca farming community leaders. The 2016 accord aimed to dismantle the drug economy while providing a soft landing for the tens of thousands of farmers who cultivate coca through the National Program for Integral Substitution. In exchange for promises of direct payments and support for alternative livelihoods, 99,000 families

⁶³ Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian organisation official, September 2020.

⁶⁴ "The peace accord has a route that can be an effective route to reduce violence, but the government is clearly not convinced ... and they are inventing all sorts of other ways. The government route is only protection. But it's much more complicated. It's about transforming the territory, strengthening the state, bringing state and people together". Crisis Group telephone interview, prominent civil society leader, April 2020.

agreed to voluntarily eradicate their coca crops; according to the government, 95 per cent of them complied and have not replanted.⁶⁵ At the centre of the plan, as broadly imagined in the peace deal, stand local allies who bring farmers on board and disseminate program information.⁶⁶

These activists became visible to their neighbours but also to armed interests eyeing control over the coca economy.⁶⁷ In Bajo Cauca, for example, the FARC dissident group Frente 18 instructed residents not to cooperate with the substitution program. The Gaitanistas asked farmers to sign up but demanded a percentage of government aid they received.⁶⁸ As early as late 2016, coca farmer associations in Montelíbano and Tierralta reported threats and harassment. In January 2017, the first local advocate of the government's substitution program was assassinated – José Yimer Cartagena, head of the farmer (*campesino*) association in Alto Sinú.⁶⁹ The Instituto de Estudios Para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz), a civil society organisation, counted 36 deaths of leaders advocating substitution between the signing of the accord and the end of 2019.⁷⁰

Realising the dangers, the program phased out public meetings with community leaders after Duque took office in 2018, and it sought ways to avoid drawing attention to beneficiaries.⁷¹ Yet some risks persist. Armed groups in Putumayo, Bajo Cauca, Cauca and Atlantic coastal departments used the national COVID-19 lockdown to target advocates of crop substitution and coca farmers' rights.⁷²

⁶⁵ "Informe No. 19, Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos PNIS", Presidential Commission for Stabilisation and Consolidation, 4 February 2020.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, government substitution program officials, Bogotá and Montería, October 2019. Coca substitution is addressed in point 4.1 of the 2016 peace agreement. "Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace", op. cit.

⁶⁷ Coca economy regulation was a vital source of financing for the FARC insurgency from the 1980s onward and helps explain how the group was able to exert significant social and economic control in rural areas. "Informe Especial: Economías Ilegales, Actores Armados y Nuevos Escenarios de Riesgo en el Posacuerdo", Ombudsman, September 2018; Crisis Group Report, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, official, Ombudsman, Montería, October 2019; civil society observer, April 2020.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, official, Ombudsman, Montería, October 2019. "José Yimer Cartagena murió creyendo firmemente en el Acuerdo de Paz", *Verdad Abierta*, 17 December 2018.

⁷⁰ "Informe especial sobre agresiones a personas defensoras de los derechos humanos y de los acuerdos de paz", Indepaz, Marcha Patriótica and Cumbre Agraria, 28 February 2020, p. 15.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior government substitution program official, Bogotá, October 2019; Presidential Commission for Stabilisation and Consolidation adviser, Bogotá, October 2019. The Presidential Commission for Stabilisation and Consolidation oversees protection for community leaders enrolled in the crop substitution program, as well as for demobilised FARC combatants.

⁷² At least five advocates were killed and several more forced to leave their communities during the 2020 lockdown. Marco Rivadeneira, a well-known crop substitution and peace process advocate in Puerto Asís, Putumayo, was assassinated on 19 March. In early June, two co-founders of the Asociación Campesina del Sur de Córdoba were assassinated; both were substitution program beneficiaries. On 29 August, a coca substitution leader and former FARC combatant, Jorge Iván Ramos, was killed in Santa Rosa, Bolívar. Crisis Group telephone interview, human rights official, Programa Somos Defensores, April 2020. Sara Lopera, "El Covid no paró la guerra en Bajo Cauca y sur de Córdoba, pero sí la sustitución", *La Silla Vacía*, 8 June 2020.

Campaigners for the substitution program face a second wave of pressure from within their communities. The costly substitution program has struggled to meet its goals in distributing subsidies and technical support.⁷³ Roughly two thirds of the families who voluntarily eradicated their coca have received no support to plant an alternative crop or find a different livelihood, leaving many economically devastated. In Cauca, where much of the rural economy is dependent on coca, some social leaders advocating substitution have had to move or stop their work for fear of retribution from both disappointed farmers and armed groups.⁷⁴

D. *Economic Interests*

Social leaders report receiving threats when they raise concerns relating to large business ventures and natural resource exploitation. At the heart of these threats stand conflicts over land ownership, which is notoriously concentrated in a few hands in Colombia.⁷⁵ Land tenure inequality was a salient grievance throughout the FARC insurgency, and the peace deal outlines a comprehensive plan for rural reform.⁷⁶ Yet efforts at restoring stolen land to its rightful owners and handing formal titles to small farmers, which began before the agreement was signed, have moved slowly and rarely resulted in reallocation from powerful business interests to impoverished communities.⁷⁷ The state Ombudsman reported in 2019 that 85 per cent of social leader deaths in rural areas were associated with efforts to defend land rights and vulnerable people, while at least two social leaders campaigning for land restitution were assassinated in 2020.⁷⁸

⁷³ "There has been frustration that we are not meeting our promises, but we are meeting our promises – at the rate that resources allow us". Crisis Group interview, crop substitution program official, October 2019. Meeting these commitments could cost the government from \$2.5 to \$4.7 billion. "En qué va la sustitución de cultivos ilícitos: Principales avances, desafíos y propuestas para hacerles frente", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, July 2017. Colombia is relying almost entirely on domestic resources to finance crop substitution, as major donors are complying with U.S. sanctions that bar cooperation with former FARC combatants. "Informe No. 19, Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos PNIS", Presidential Commission for Stabilisation and Consolidation, 4 February 2020.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, officials, Afro-descendant community civil society organisation, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

⁷⁵ Sixty per cent of farm owners in Colombia had small plots in 2010, but this land represented just 3.7 per cent of the total hectares dedicated to farming, while the largest farms owned by just 0.3 per cent of farmers represented 29 per cent of all hectares in cultivation. Jean-Paul Faguet, Fabio Sánchez and Marta-Juanita Villaveces, "Perversion of Land Distribution by Landed Elites: Power, Inequality and Development in Colombia", *World Development*, forthcoming.

⁷⁶ The peace agreement's point 1.1 addresses efforts to democratise access to land, including through a land bank and the titling of informal holdings. "Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace," November 2016.

⁷⁷ Law 1448 of 2011 created a process for land restitution that continues today. "Estadísticas de Restitución", Land Restitution Unit, 31 May 2020.

⁷⁸ "Informe de Seguimiento: Alerta Temprana 026-18", Ombudsman, August 2019, p. 25. The two victims are Luis Darío Rodríguez Narváez, a member of the Union of Displaced and Vulnerable Families in Tierralta, Córdoba, on 18 January 2020; and Mario Chilhueso, a member of the Association of Workers and Small-scale Farmers in Buenos Aires, Cauca, on 19 April 2020.

A number of land conflicts revolve around large infrastructure projects. Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, paramilitary offensives displaced or silenced critics of public works projects and extractive industries.⁷⁹ While the paramilitary forces have since demobilised, environmental group leaders report that intimidation and violence persist. One place where the patterns hold is Hidroituango, site of the large hydro-electric plant in northern Antioquia. At least three social leaders who defended the rights of victims of massacres committed by paramilitaries in the area and raised awareness of the plant's environmental impact were killed in 2018.⁸⁰ The state Ombudsman has reported that at least four armed groups now operate in the area, including the Gaitanistas. Civil society representatives say the culprits have changed but not the offences: "With any resistance, there is always repression or elimination".⁸¹

E. *Quelling Resistance*

Violence targeting social leaders often signals that armed interests are seeking to impose their authority in a given place by removing recognisable faces of civic resistance. This intent to silence dissent, together with the increasingly fractured nature of conflict, helps explain why threats are increasingly directed at low-profile figures with limited influence – sometimes confined to a single neighbourhood or city block.⁸² A former FARC combatant who now criticises dissident factions explained their binary logic, in which "100 per cent of the people" need to be compliant because "otherwise they are a threat".⁸³

Community activists are often among the few people willing to push back against armed groups' pressure. This is true in remote areas with little state presence as well as in city neighbourhoods where armed actors prey on the vulnerable to extort, traffic goods and recruit youth. Bogotá's southern suburb of Soacha, home to sprawling informal settlements and a significant population of internally displaced conflict victims and migrants, is one such area.⁸⁴ The largest number of threats to social leaders have come as a result of their denouncing drug trafficking in the neighbour-

⁷⁹ "Una nación desplazada: Informe nacional del desplazamiento forzado en Colombia", National Centre for Historical Memory, 2015. The study cites evidence of paramilitary involvement in violent displacement linked to large-scale projects and extractive industries in Urabá, Magdalena Medio, Montes de María, Andén Pacífico Sur and Catatumbo. See in particular pp. 244, 255-256 and 298.

⁸⁰ The three are: Ana María Cortés Mena, who worked with victims through the local Ombudsman in the municipality of Cáceres; Hugo Albeiro George, who worked with the Asociación de Víctimas y Afectados por Megaproyectos; and Luis Alberto Torres, of the Asociación de Pequeños Mineros y Pesqueros de Puerto Valdivia. "La muerte de Hugo y Luis, dos líderes que se enfrentaban a Hidroituango", *Semana Sostenible*, 14 May 2018; "Las lideresas asesinadas tienen nombre", *Pares*, 24 July 2018. Astrid Torres Ramirez, "Colombia Nunca Mas: Extractivismo – Graves violaciones a los derechos humanos. Caso Hidroituango: Una lucha por la memoria y contra la impunidad", Corporación Jurídica Libertad, 2018, p. 36.

⁸¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society investigator, Antioquia, June 2020.

⁸² As a subset of the category, local community leaders account for the second-largest number of all social leaders killed between 2017 and 2019, according to Somos Defensores. See Figure 5 on p. 14 above.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, demobilised FARC combatant, Cali, February 2020.

⁸⁴ At least 50,000 of Soacha's estimated one million residents are officially recognised victims of conflict. Crisis Group interview, official, mayor's office, Soacha, February 2020.

hood *ollas* (selling points) that fuel consumption of *basuco* (local crack cocaine) and marijuana, the latter being used to recruit youth and children.⁸⁵

Advocates who resist or try to prevent child recruitment are also targeted.⁸⁶ Armed groups in both rural and urban areas recruit children, sometimes using food to get them to perform small tasks as messengers. A community leader in Soacha, who runs an after-school and feeding program and has received numerous death threats, explained:

Armed groups are recruiting the youth, and they know that we are here teaching them a different way. So, I am a thorn in their side. The ones who want to assassinate me work with criminal bands – big ones – so what can I do? They say I am a *sapo* [informant].⁸⁷

Other social leaders have found themselves at risk for resisting armed groups' economic activities, for example in communities that sit along key drug and other trafficking routes. Perhaps the clearest example of local resistance comes from leaders of the indigenous Nasa community in northern Cauca.⁸⁸ The Nasa have constitutional autonomy in their territory, and their unarmed indigenous guard used the FARC's departure as an opportunity to fortify their own control. When FARC dissident factions, the Popular Liberation Army and other unknown outfits began to appear in late 2017, the guard set up checkpoints to regulate movement, later apprehending reported members of armed groups.⁸⁹

The armed groups' response was swift and violent. In 2019, indigenous authorities reported five massacres and 87 homicides in their territory, including numerous killings of social leaders and the brazen assassination of indigenous governor Cristina Bautista.⁹⁰ A member of the guard stated that the violence resulted from the indigenous groups' resistance:

They start to harass people and threaten, and then people are displaced. But here, we do not move, we fight back. After 2017, we became the military. We started capturing one, two, five [members of armed groups]. The amount of threats and

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, local government Ombudsman official, Soacha, February 2020. Armed bands initially offer school students free marijuana but later ask for payment or for the student to earn the drug "in kind" through small tasks. One social leader described being shot at after asking a nearby *olla* to move indoors so children would not be exposed to it. The person has since received numerous death threats. Crisis Group interviews, high school students, social leader, Altos de Cazucá, January and February 2020.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, official, Interior Ministry, Bogotá, March 2020.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, community leader, Altos de Cazucá, January and February 2020.

⁸⁸ Government definitions classify most indigenous authorities and guardsmen as social leaders.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, indigenous community leaders and indigenous guard members, Caloto and Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

⁹⁰ "Informe de Desarmonías Territoriales Zona Norte del Departamento del Cauca Colombia 2019", Tejido Defensa de la Vida y los Derechos Humanos Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte de Cauca, 31 December 2019.

pamphlets also rose. There were seventeen pamphlets just for me as coordinator of our guard.⁹¹

The indigenous experience in northern Cauca is also a telling example of how resistance to armed groups often entails intra-community conflict. Many new recruits to FARC dissident fronts since 2016 are Nasa; other Nasa are willing to report on their neighbours to armed groups in exchange for payment or protection.⁹² These tensions, alongside concern over the high price for resisting armed groups, pushed the indigenous guard in late 2019 to start limiting confrontations with them.⁹³

F. “Moral” Authorities

Armed groups seeking to establish themselves as de facto local authorities have historically imposed social norms that they may define as moral regulations. The practice persists today, and has even intensified, as armed groups strive to ensure local compliance with their demands.⁹⁴ Armed groups may accuse marginalised or minority sectors of society of disloyalty or collaboration with enemies.⁹⁵ They mete out retribution, often violently, describing it as “social cleansing” – demonstrating their ability to punish those who fail to conform.⁹⁶ Social leaders who represent the LGBT community and women’s rights face an acute threat in this regard. As one trans leader put it: “The work that we do advocating for the rights of our community makes us a target”.⁹⁷

Intimidation of women social leaders, particularly those who campaign on issues such as the rights of victims of sexual violence, is both widespread and often overlooked. Women leaders report threats related to their visibility in societies where men are usually in a dominant position: “FARC dissidents support the idea of a ‘good mother’, which means being at home with your child, not working”.⁹⁸ Rather than assassinations, women leaders may be more likely to receive threats – for example to their children – aimed at forcing them to stop their social work and/or leave the

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, indigenous guard coordinator, Caloto, February 2020. In 2019, the indigenous guard recorded finding 58 pamphlets threatening its community from six different armed groups. Cauca’s indigenous resistance to armed groups is part of a historical struggle for the preservation of land, political autonomy and cultural traditions. “Nuestra Vida ha Sido Nuestra Lucha”, National Centre for Historical Memory, 2020.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, indigenous guard member, Caloto, February 2020; indigenous community leader from Toribio, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, indigenous guard coordinators and local community leaders, Caloto, February 2020.

⁹⁴ In the first three months of 2020, the state Ombudsman’s office reported a risk of “social cleansing” in at least four departments: Bolívar, Caquetá, Choco and Antioquia.

⁹⁵ “Violent armed groups seek scapegoats for harm inflicted against them and hence punish marginalised groups, for instance, for collaborating with the enemy”. Annette Idler, *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime and Governance at the Edges of Colombia’s War* (Oxford, 2019), p. 145.

⁹⁶ “[C]landestine groups ... assassinated completely defenceless people. They believed that they were acting correctly, since the victims were marked by certain identities: street dwellers, sex workers, delinquents”. “Limpieza Social: Una Violencia Mal Nombrada”, National Centre for Historical Memory, 2015, p. 15.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, trans community social leader, Soacha, March 2020.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Afro-descendant community leader, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

area.⁹⁹ In El Carmen de Bolívar municipality, for example, where the Gaitanistas and Aguilas Negras in 2019 circulated pamphlets warning of “social cleansing”, women accounted for only two of the 22 assassinations in that municipality in 2019, but they received the majority of the 136 reported threats.¹⁰⁰ Several women leaders also report that state officials declined to file police reports about threats against them, arguing that the women themselves were to blame for campaigning on sensitive issues.¹⁰¹

** This citation was changed on 9 October 2020 to rectify the original version that incorrectly quoted the minister as saying “the ‘immense majority’ of murders were part of ‘lovers’ quarrels’ (líos de faldas)”.*

⁹⁹ Women account for 15 per cent of the leaders assassinated since the peace accord was signed. “Informe especial sobre agresiones a personas defensoras de los derechos humanos y de los acuerdos de paz”, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ “Alerta Temprana 006-2020: El Carmen de Bolívar”, Ombudsman, 2020. Colombia’s police as well as numerous analysts believe that the Aguilas Negras group exists only in name, as a front for various criminal bands. Although authorities have rarely tracked pamphlets from the Aguilas Negras to subsequent acts of violence, these messages generate terror in communities and have reportedly been used to favour right-wing interests. “Águilas Negras: el ‘genérico’ de las amenazas en Colombia”, *El Tiempo*, 20 January 2020. Ariel Avila, “¿Qué son las Aguilas Negras?”, Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 29 December 2018.

¹⁰¹ “When I first reported threats, the [state prosecutor] told me that I should stop doing the work [advocating for victims of sexual violence], go low-profile, and then the threats would stop”, Crisis Group interview, leader representing victims of sexual violence, Bogotá, November 2019. Two other women reported similar experiences. Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Soacha, January and March 2020.

IV. Security Policy and the Military

Colombia's armed forces are the primary arbiter of internal security, as they have been for nearly 70 years.¹⁰² Even as Colombia's conflict has evolved, the military has maintained its focus on traditional operations against armed groups and protecting state economic interests. These objectives tend to crowd out other functions, including the peacebuilding and community liaison roles contemplated after the 2016 accord.¹⁰³ Resistance to change within military ranks and the Duque government has ensured that relations with communities and social leaders remain strained.

A. *The "Peace with Legality" Strategy*

The Duque administration sees drug trafficking and organised crime as the root causes of attacks on social leaders.¹⁰⁴ This link between violence and crime forms the basis of the government's security strategy, known as "peace with legality", which prioritises dismantling illicit business and fighting armed groups.¹⁰⁵

The government does not believe that it is engaged in an armed conflict with politically motivated opponents.¹⁰⁶ Numerous officials have declined to describe the security situation as an armed conflict, at times generating controversy.¹⁰⁷ Instead, the administration views armed groups as security threats rooted in criminal activity, and as a result tends to reject negotiation with them.¹⁰⁸ Drawing on this understanding, after the ELN in July proposed negotiating a bilateral humanitarian ceasefire, the government said the onus was on that group to first unilaterally cease all armed and criminal activity.¹⁰⁹ The Duque administration proceeded to launch an individu-

¹⁰² Beginning in the early 1960s, and then accelerating with President Álvaro Uribe's first term in 2002, the military has held almost exclusive responsibility for upholding public order in Colombia. See Francisco Leal Buitrago, "Una Visión de la Seguridad en Colombia," *Análisis Político*, no. 73 (2011), pp. 3-36.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat involved in military reform, June 2020. The clearest example aimed at relations with social leaders was a 2016 military initiative called Faith in Colombia, intended to expand state presence in rural areas and improve community confidence. Rocío del Pilar Pachón Pinzón, "En el Fortalecimiento de la Gobernabilidad Territorial," *Transformación Militar*, no. 1 (2016), pp. 148-157.

¹⁰⁴ "Presidente Duque reiteró que detrás de los asesinatos de líderes sociales están el narcotráfico, la extracción ilegal de minerales y los grupos armados organizados", op. cit.

¹⁰⁵ "Paz con Legalidad", Colombian Presidency, 2018. The security strategy revives the argument of former President Álvaro Uribe that armed groups in Colombia are not political organisations but rather criminal terrorist operations that require a military-led response.

¹⁰⁶ "Colombia doesn't have an armed conflict. What we have is a problem of violence financed by illegal economies. ... The armed groups in Colombia do not have a political project". Crisis Group interview, senator, Democratic Centre party, Bogotá, January 2020.

¹⁰⁷ One prominent example is the director of the National Centre of Historical Memory. See "Colombia: las ambigüedades del director del Centro de Memoria sobre el conflicto armado", *France 24*, 5 February 2020.

¹⁰⁸ The government has not ruled out talks with the ELN but placed steep conditions on initiating dialogue while encouraging individual fighters to demobilise.

¹⁰⁹ "We propose to President Iván Duque that we broker a bilateral ceasefire for 90 days. Our negotiating delegation in Havana [Cuba] is equipped to follow up with the operational details". ELN sta-

al demobilisation program aimed at inducing single or small groups of combatants to desert in exchange for lighter judicial sentences.¹¹⁰ Over 100 fighters have applied to the program, at least some of whom defected after the military apprehended them.¹¹¹

The Duque administration's view of armed group violence as a manifestation of lawlessness also leads it to regard punitive military operations to be at least as important as rural development initiatives that might redress political grievances these groups exploit. Although military operations are rarely the only type of government intervention in conflict-affected areas, armed forces often accompany the rollout of economic and social projects, and the government is keen to align these initiatives with its security priorities.¹¹²

The government views its strategy as vital to reducing assassinations over the long term: "If we all agree we want to stop the killing of social leaders, we should all agree that we need to strengthen the military. Communities say they don't want the army, but then the criminal organisations win. We need a military presence".¹¹³ Following half a dozen assassinations in Cauca in late 2019, for example, President Duque ordered 2,500 additional troops to the region to dismantle FARC dissident groups.¹¹⁴ Forces were also deployed to Chocó in response to rising violence, including against community leaders, in 2019 and early 2020.¹¹⁵ Security sources report that the military seeks to show quantifiable results – such as numbers of key commanders killed or captured, amounts of illicit crops and drug inputs seized, and hectares of coca eradicated.¹¹⁶

Prioritising the battle with armed groups can come at the cost of protecting social leaders and their communities. Military operations often fail to take into account the

tement, 7 July 2020. "El gobierno colombiano descarta la propuesta del ELN del cese al fuego bilateral", EFE, 9 July 2020.

¹¹⁰ "Decreto número 601 de 2020", Colombian Presidency, 28 April 2020. "Gobierno Nacional Firma Decreto 965 del 7 de julio de 2020 que crea una nueva ruta de Sometimiento Individual a la Justicia de integrantes de Grupos Armados Organizados", press release, High Commission for Peace, 8 July 2020.

¹¹¹ Several dozen ELN fighters requested to demobilise after suffering heavy defeat at the military's hands in Cauca in May. Crisis Group correspondence, security official, May 2020. At least 71 fighters have presented themselves to authorities in Cauca, as well as 58 in Antioquia. "En el Cauca operan 5 estructuras de disidencias de las Farc y 4 estructuras del ELN y las desmantelaremos", press release, High Commission for Peace, 27 August 2020.

¹¹² For instance, soldiers will deploy in many areas slated for rural reform in the peace agreement. The president's Zonas Futuras initiative aims to link these development programs with a stronger military presence to better fight armed groups. "Decreto número 2278 de 2020", Colombian Presidency, 16 December 2019.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, senator, Democratic Centre party, Bogotá, January 2020.

¹¹⁴ "Declaración del Presidente Iván Duque al término del Consejo de Seguridad en el departamento del Cauca", Colombian Presidency, 30 October 2019.

¹¹⁵ "Ordené fortalecer presencia de la Fuerza Pública en la zona de Bojayá, Chocó, afirmó el Presidente Duque", Colombian Presidency, 2 January 2020.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security source, February, March and April 2020. On 18 May 2019, *The New York Times* revealed that the military had issued a directive to double the number of killed and captured combatants. "Colombia army's new kill orders send chills down ranks", *The New York Times*, 18 May 2019. Several days later, the military revoked the directive and President Duque pledged to set up an independent commission to investigate the order. "Colombia will review military orders amid human rights fears", *The New York Times*, 25 May 2019.

effects on local residents. Certain communities argue that the mere presence of soldiers puts them at direct risk. In northern Cauca, for example, members of the Nasa communities' indigenous guard explained that military operations contribute to a climate of hostility and can spark open combat, with civilians caught in the middle: "When the military comes, there are more clashes with armed groups".¹¹⁷ Communities in these settings view the military as focused not on their protection but on eliminating an opponent, regardless of the consequences for locals.¹¹⁸

Moreover, armed groups in Colombia rarely choose to confront the state's vastly superior military force – or even rival irregular outfits – directly. Instead, in the face of state security campaigns they train violence at social leaders and alleged collaborators, seeking to ensure that the local population remains compliant. During the national COVID-19 lockdown, the military helped evacuate threatened social leaders from armed group strongholds on at least three occasions.¹¹⁹ But some security officials express frustration at their mission objectives' focus on drug seizures and fighting armed groups, which limits the flexibility necessary to build trust with communities and understand the unintended consequences of military offensives for local residents.¹²⁰

Communities' wariness of the military is reinforced by perceptions that armed forces, under pressure for results, have at times resorted to "false positives", executing civilians including social leaders in order to count them as combatant deaths – as was the case between 2003 and 2008.¹²¹ Although more than 1,700 former military personnel have now been convicted and sentenced for involvement in these crimes over a decade ago, communities continue to denounce alleged executions by armed forces. On 1 June, indigenous U'wa authorities in Norte de Santander said Joel Villamizar, killed by the military as an alleged member of the ELN, was in fact a local social leader.¹²² Former defence officials also report pervasive prejudice in the military against social leaders representing communities living under armed group in-

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, indigenous community leader, Caloto, February 2020.

¹¹⁸ Another example comes from Chocó. Since 2017, local authorities and civil society groups have advocated a humanitarian ceasefire between the military and ELN in order to reduce the level of fighting, which has confined thousands forcibly to their homes. "Propuesta de Acuerdo Humanitario ¡Ya! En el Chocó", August 2017.

¹¹⁹ Dozens of social leaders were evacuated in Cauca in March and June 2020. "Evacúan a diez personas amenazadas por disidencias de las Farc en Suárez", RCN, 26 March 2020; and "Evacúan a 38 personas amenazadas por grupos armados en Cauca", RCN, 5 June 2020.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, security source, February 2020.

¹²¹ Between 2003 and 2008, Uribe's government offered incentives including salary and career benefits for soldiers to undertake kill-and-capture missions. The policy led to a large number of extrajudicial killings. "Por 'falsos positivos' van 1,740 condenas", *El Tiempo*, 18 May 2020.

¹²² The statement from the Asociación de Autoridades Tradicionales y Cabildos U'wa was publicised by other community organisations. "Comunicado a la opinión pública nacional e internacional", tweet by Asociación Campesina del Catatumbo, @AscamcatOficia, 11:34pm, 31 May 2020. Likewise, community members in Teorama, Catatumbo, found themselves at odds with the military after soldiers killed 22-year-old Salvador Jaimes Durán. The community insisted that he was a local leader, whereas the military believes that he was also part of the ELN. "Investigan si líder social que murió en Teorama pertenecía al ELN", *Semana*, 29 June 2020. "Ejército responde a denuncias de asesinato de líder en Teorama", *El Tiempo*, 27 June 2020.

fluence: "There is a discourse that social leaders are guerrillas, that they are mixed up in drug trafficking".¹²³

A number of social leaders argue that the government's rhetoric surrounding the 2016 peace agreement exposes them to greater danger as well.¹²⁴ Duque came to office promising to amend what he argued was a flawed deal, overly lenient toward the FARC.¹²⁵ Subsequent statements by top officials have occasionally seemed to downplay the risks leaders face, generating outcry over the administration's apparent belittling of the problem.¹²⁶ Despite this public attention and mass protests in late 2019, social leaders say the damage is already largely done, as government attitudes have provided political cover for threats and violence against them.¹²⁷

B. *Collusion with Crime*

There are numerous allegations of coordination or complicity between armed forces and criminal groups in acts of violence against social leaders. While the state denies such collusion, the Inspector General's Office announced an investigation in July 2018 to uncover any wrongdoing, stating: "There have been cases of co-optation of agents of the state by criminal organisations, which are targeting social leaders".¹²⁸ As of September 2020, the Inspector General was investigating eighteen acts of violence against social leaders allegedly committed by members of the armed forces – including fourteen homicides.¹²⁹ Civil society groups meanwhile pulled out of dialogue with the government and called on the interior and defence ministers to resign in November 2019, alleging "direct participation by members of the armed forces" in the assassination of social leaders including indigenous governor Cristina Bautista.¹³⁰

¹²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, former defence official, July 2020.

¹²⁴ "The peace process meanwhile has been delegitimised and stigmatised, and this has grave consequences for the leaders supporting it". Crisis Group interviews, Ombudsman officials, Bogotá, January 2020.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°67, *Risky Business: The Duque Government's Approach to Peace in Colombia*, 21 June 2018.

¹²⁶ In one clear example, Colombia's Interior Minister Alicia Arango sparked controversy for saying more people in Colombia are killed in cases of cell phone theft than in retaliation for defending human rights. "Persiste controversia alrededor de crímenes de líderes sociales y defensores de derechos humanos", *El Espectador*, 4 March 2020.

¹²⁷ "This is one of the worst moments in recent history for trust between the state and the communities – and particularly social leaders". Crisis Group telephone interview, prominent civil society figure, April 2020.

¹²⁸ "Estamos indagando si hay agentes de la fuerza pública involucrados en asesinatos de los líderes sociales: Procurador", Inspector General's Office, 11 July 2018.

¹²⁹ "Procuraduría revela investigaciones contra militares por asesinatos de líderes sociales", RCN Radio, 22 September 2020.

¹³⁰ "La Confluencia suspende su participación en el proceso de formulación de la Política Pública Integral de Respeto y Garantías para la labor de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos", press release, Alianza de Organizaciones Sociales y Afines, Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos, Plataforma Colombia de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo, Cumbre Agraria, 6 November 2019. Neither acknowledged these civil society calls; both Duque and the military have blamed armed groups for the attack. "Tras asesinato de cinco indígenas, presidente Duque instruye a Ministerio del Interior a realizar comité especial de DD.HH. con la gobernación y organizaciones indígenas", CNN, 30 October 2019.

Numerous social leaders have reported experiencing heightened violence after denouncing links between armed groups and members of the security forces or government, for example in Chocó's Alto Baudó municipality, where the military has a significant presence.¹³¹ Prominent social leader Leyner Palacios wrote to and met President Duque early in 2020 to discuss concerns including the apparent complicity between the armed forces and Gaitanistas in the region.¹³² The military has denied these allegations, while noting that disciplinary procedures are under way within its ranks.¹³³

While it is difficult to establish the extent of ties between the security forces and armed groups, the perception of complicity alone is damaging to military-community relations. The government contends that protecting all Colombia's vast and often rugged terrain is impossible and that it must deploy troops first and foremost to the areas in greatest danger.¹³⁴ Yet local civil society figures in Chocó and Cauca as well as international monitors report that the military appears to target certain armed actors and not others. While the military has pushed back against the ELN in Chocó, "paramilitaries [the Gaitanistas] have been gaining a lot of territory [but] we haven't seen any fights by the military against paramilitaries".¹³⁵ These perceptions are not limited to the current government's term in office: in 2017 and 2018, communities in southern Córdoba denounced military inaction as the Gaitanistas seized control of former FARC territory.¹³⁶

¹³¹ "Confinamiento y muerte en el Alto Baudó, Chocó", Catholic Dioceses of Istmina, Quibdó and Apartadó/Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó, 23 March 2020. "The navy and army are going to ensure that armed groups in the municipality of Bojayá don't have the space to operate". "Palabras del Presidente de la República, Iván Duque Márquez, al inicio de la reunión con líderes sociales y autoridades étnicas de Bojayá, Chocó", Colombian Presidency, 11 January 2020.

¹³² "The actions taken by paramilitary group the AGC are undertaken in collusion with the armed forces. ... This undermines the legitimacy of the state". Leyner Palacios, "Letter to President Iván Duque", Bogotá, 8 January 2020. Palacios, a survivor of a 2002 FARC cylinder bomb massacre that left 79 dead, has since faced an attempt on his life in which one of his bodyguards was murdered. "Asesinan en Cali al escolta del líder social Leyner Palacios", *Semana*, 4 March 2020. On 23 March 2020, three Catholic dioceses in the department accused "some state officials and members of the military" of having ties to illegal groups. "Confinamiento y muerte en Alto Baudó (Chocó)", op. cit. A subsequent communiqué from the Quibdó diocese on 7 June reiterated these concerns.

¹³³ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°76, *Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast*, 8 August 2019.

¹³⁴ "Colombia sees surge in mass killings despite historic peace deal", *The New York Times*, 13 September 2020.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, women's rights leader from Chocó, June 2020. An additional example comes from southern Cauca, where the FARC dissident faction Frente Carlos Patiño has waged a campaign throughout 2020 to dislodge the ELN. Residents and international monitors say the military operations in the area have disproportionately targeted the ELN, allowing the FARC dissidents to move in. Crisis Group telephone interviews, indigenous social leader in Toribío and international monitor based in Popayán, August 2020.

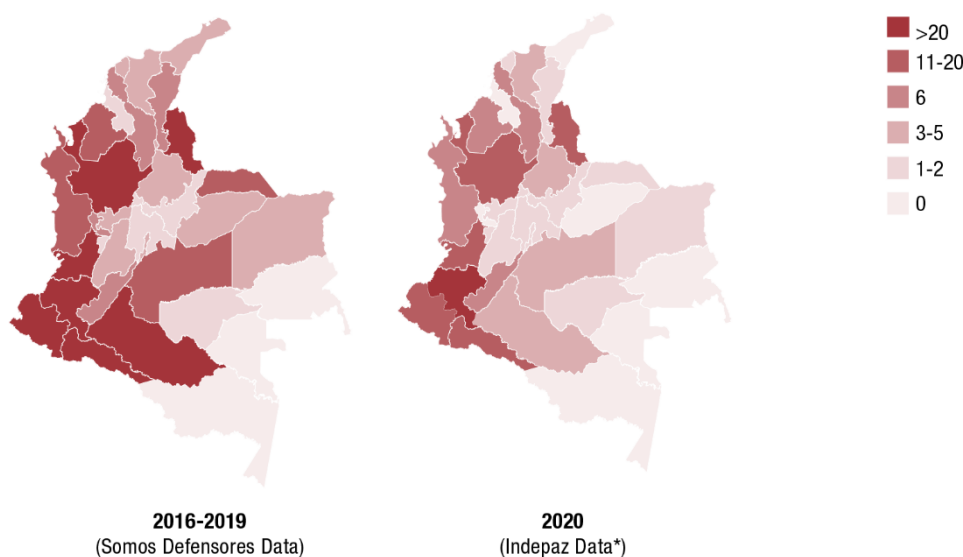
¹³⁶ "The way that these groups entered gives the impression that the government was complicit, and that it was coordinated: the military left, and suddenly the Gaitanistas entered". Crisis Group interview, official, Ombudsman, October 2019. At that time, the military focused heavily on securing demobilisation zones for the FARC.

V. The Effects of COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Colombia has not fundamentally changed these conditions, but it has exacerbated the risks social leaders face. Limits on mobility to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have meant that leaders' locations are fixed, making them sitting ducks for would-be assailants.¹³⁷ Some leaders' security details have not stayed with them, leaving them unprotected at home.¹³⁸ Quarantines limited leaders' access to their communities, as well as their ability to gather with colleagues to coordinate or respond to situations of risk.¹³⁹ Travel prohibitions also reduced the information that filters out of difficult-to-reach areas, particularly where mobile phone service is poor or civil society groups are afraid to communicate electronically.¹⁴⁰

Initial data from the national lockdown confirms these dangers. During the first two months of lockdown, social leader homicides rose 53 per cent even as the overall national murder rate declined 16 per cent.¹⁴¹ Violence against social leaders in 2020 thus far has clustered in areas historically exposed to conflict, as the map in Figure 6 below demonstrates.

Figure 6: Killings of Social Leaders by Department



Source: Data from Somos Defensores and Indepaz. * As of 16 September 2020. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

¹³⁷ On the first day of national quarantine on 24 March, unknown assailants killed two indigenous leaders from the Embera community in Valle de Cauca who shared a home and were complying with the lockdown. Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes, "Líderes sociales en tiempos de coronavirus", *DeJusticia*, 5 April 2020.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, June 2020. See also tweet by Francia Márquez Mina, @Francia MarquezM, social leader, 6:21am, 29 May 2020.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society organisation staffers, March and April 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Ombudsman, April 2020. The UN echoes these concerns. "Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Verification Mission to Colombia", S/2020/603, 26 June 2020.

¹⁴¹ "El conflicto armado y su impacto humanitario y ambiental: tendencias durante la pandemia", *Fundación Ideas para la Paz*, 24 May 2020.

Armed group activity during the pandemic is also exacerbating insecurity for social leaders. The health crisis offers new rationales for imposing rules on communities in the guise of quarantine restrictions. In areas without a strong state presence, the crisis has further complicated the lives of those trying to pursue normal economic activity in the shadow of armed groups. Dozens of regional armed outfits have issued regulations limiting movement, including curfews, checkpoints, and restrictions on food and medicine supplies.¹⁴² With no public health officials present to enforce quarantines in Bajo Cauca, Gaitanistas have instructed social leaders to become the public faces of the group's lockdown orders.¹⁴³ Along the border with Brazil, in the department with one of the highest infection rates per capita, Amazonas, "various FARC dissident fronts are the ones that have presence and are setting the rules for quarantine, not the state".¹⁴⁴ In some cases, armed groups have delivered food or directed aid as a way to bolster future community collaboration.¹⁴⁵

Several armed groups have taken advantage of lockdown measures to expand or consolidate their territorial control. FARC dissidents from the Frente Carlos Patiño in Cauca moved to seize a coveted drug trafficking corridor to the Pacific.¹⁴⁶ Two additional FARC dissident fronts in northern Cauca have carried out a string of attacks against demobilised combatants, social leaders and those accused of violating quarantine.¹⁴⁷ Violence against the Nasa community in Cauca has contributed to making indigenous activists the most imperilled category of social leaders this year, as shown below. The health crisis, meanwhile, provides cover for "social cleansing", with armed groups accusing non-cooperative social leaders of carrying the coronavirus to pressure or displace them.¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile, government officials described the lockdown as an opportunity to double down on the armed forces' efforts at forced coca eradication, which has worsened insecurity in certain communities.¹⁴⁹ While overall eradication has not increased, efforts have focused on communities where farmer families are enrolled in crop substitution programs and awaiting government support.¹⁵⁰ As a result, social tension and distrust of the military have increased in coca-producing communities. Farmers' associations have broken quarantine to block manual eradicators in their fields, argu-

¹⁴² "Alerta Temprana 018-2020", Ombudsman, 30 April 2020.

¹⁴³ The Gaitanistas have reportedly told social leaders they will "support them" in public health campaigns and should report any non-compliance to them. Crisis Group correspondence, official, Ombudsman, July 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, academic based in Amazonas, June 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society leaders in Antioquia, April 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group correspondence, security source, April 2020.

¹⁴⁷ "Alerta Temprana 018-2020", op. cit.

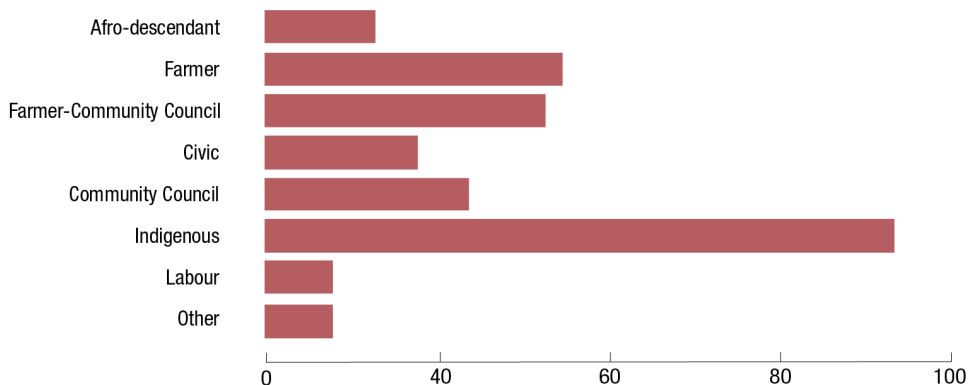
¹⁴⁸ At least one such case was reported in Córdoba in April. Crisis Group correspondence, victims' leader from Tierralta, April 2020. Infected individuals, or those believed to be infected, have faced stigma, harassment and threats ranging from ostracism to displacement. Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Ombudsman, April 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group correspondence, security source, April 2020; telephone interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, April 2020.

¹⁵⁰ These include Bajo Cauca, Putumayo and Catatumbo. Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior civil society leader, April 2020; Antioquia civil society investigator, June 2020. Juan Carlos Garzón, "La erradicación forzada no ha aumentado, pero los cultivadores la están pasando mal", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 1 June 2020.

ing that such efforts will bankrupt them.¹⁵¹ Armed groups in turn have taken advantage of the turmoil to target proponents of voluntary eradication.¹⁵² At least five individuals affiliated with the government's substitution program and coca-growing community leaders were killed between March and June.

Figure 7: Assassinations of Social Leaders by Type of Leadership, 2020



Source: Data from Indepaz. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G

Some emerging trends are likely to outlast the pandemic. Colombia expects to see a significant economic contraction in 2020, which will hit subsistence farmers and informal workers harder than most. Funding for civil society organisations is likely to collapse, even as communities demand more support from their leaders.¹⁵³ The pandemic's toll will thereby worsen the economic pressures and institutional weaknesses that render communities vulnerable to armed groups: "Quarantine has exacerbated unemployment and poverty, and this is a seed for the armed groups to grow, recruiting children, buying off communities".¹⁵⁴ The few attempts to redress inequality through the 2016 peace agreement are delayed and risk being put on hold entirely as COVID-19 strains state finances.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ For example, on 1 July, roughly 500 coca farmers prevented 40 armed forces members from leaving the area where they were forcibly eradicating coca in protests against the lack of alternative livelihoods in San José de Micay, Cauca. "En Cauca, miembros del Ejército fueron retenidos por campesinos", *La Silla Vacía*, 1 July 2020.

¹⁵² "Las disidencias de Farc aliada con el narcotráfico cobra otra vida de dirigentes del Coordinador Nacional Agrario", Asociación Nacional Campesina, Coordinador Nacional Agrario de Colombia, 17 April 2020.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Ombudsman, April 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, official, humanitarian relief organisation, September 2020.

¹⁵⁵ On 22 April, congressional representatives from the Democratic Centre party proposed using peace process funding to address the pandemic, though the government has since said it would not change the agreement. "Proponen usar fondos del proceso de paz para emergencia de coronavirus", *Semana*, 23 April 2020.

VI. Protection and Prosecution

The Colombian government's approach to protecting social leaders focuses on providing security for individuals while attacking armed groups. The first part of this approach has certainly saved lives. The latter has proven ineffective at interrupting cycles of violence, however, and is said by a number of social leaders to exacerbate the threats they face. In effect, both interventions are temporary. Security schemes can stave off specific risks but not the groups that create them, while military operations against armed outfits can dislodge them, but do little to re-engineer the environment in which violence flourishes.

A. *The Peace Accord and Its Aftermath*

The 2016 peace deal offered a pathway to reduce killings. The agreement created a National Commission of Security Guarantees, staffed jointly by government and civil society, to formulate a policy to dismantle organisations that attack social leaders, including armed groups and criminal organisations that emerged from the past demobilisation of paramilitaries.¹⁵⁶ The agreement also offered a roadmap for addressing rural inequalities that feed the illicit economy and spur violence.

While these initiatives are still in place, they have been supplanted by nearly a dozen new decrees and policies governing social leaders' security that largely exclude civil society and voices outside the government.¹⁵⁷ Today, responsibility for social leaders' security is dispersed among various overlapping committees, leaving no one firmly in charge. Duque's signature initiative to reduce violence, the 2018 Plan for Opportune Action, which was meant to clarify responsibility, has so far just added another layer of bureaucracy.¹⁵⁸ Boggled down in committee meetings, the government is slow to respond and ineffective at adapting to changes in Colombia's conflict, although it has begun to listen to these concerns, including through a "national conversation" with civil society, businessmen and local authorities, which started after the November 2019 protests.¹⁵⁹

B. *Triggering a State Response*

The current approach to preventing violence is split between responding to specific threats and improving general security conditions. Local authorities are legally the first responders to threats against social leaders.¹⁶⁰ Governors or mayors are required to provide emergency protection to threatened individuals and their families, such as alternative temporary lodging. In practice, such responses are rarely possible. Local

¹⁵⁶ "Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace", op. cit., point 3.4.3.

¹⁵⁷ Since 2015, various parts of the Colombian state have issued six decrees, two directives and three policy documents governing the response toward social leaders. The National Council for Economic and Social Policy expects to release a further policy document.

¹⁵⁸ "Plan de Acción Oportuna para protección de líderes sociales, defensores de derechos humanos y periodistas", Colombian Presidency, 19 November 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group participation, Colombia National Conversation, Bogotá, 9 March 2020.

¹⁶⁰ "Decreto número 2252 de 2017", Interior Ministry, 29 December 2017.

officials lack resources and may be subject to the same threats and intimidation – from armed groups or powerful economic interests – as the leaders they are charged with protecting.¹⁶¹ One common initial reaction to reported threats is for police officers to conduct regular patrols around a leader's home, until their case can be evaluated for more permanent protection.¹⁶² While patrols are intended to deter, numerous social leaders report that they can result in the leader being seen as an informant, causing an additional risk of retaliation.¹⁶³ Police patrols also expose and call attention to the threatened person's location.¹⁶⁴

Local responses should trigger support from national authorities, namely the interior ministry and the Plan for Opportune Action's coordination committee.¹⁶⁵ Some attendees nevertheless say the committee meetings offer little concrete follow-up.¹⁶⁶ Triggering a high-level response can take weeks or months, if it happens at all. Leaders note that filing police reports (*denuncias*) is a time-consuming activity that often requires shuttling from office to office. Denouncing threats can also be a danger in and of itself, as watchful armed groups or other assailants can retaliate against the victim for speaking out.¹⁶⁷ In some cases, leaders believe that members of the security forces are involved in threats against them, making police reports particularly hazardous.¹⁶⁸ Women also face greater obstacles to reporting sexual violence, which is often invisible or misunderstood by authorities. As a female social leader said:

In order to denounce [a threat], a woman has to first overcome her fear, second make the decision to denounce, and third find and successfully get access to justice mechanisms so that they file a report.¹⁶⁹

In addition, the government is meant to respond to generalised risks reported to them through the Ombudsman's early warning system. More than 90 per cent of

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Ombudsman, Bogotá, January 2020. "We are mostly talking about municipalities that have no tax revenue, staffed by people unprepared for the administrative task asked of them". Crisis Group interview, official, Interior Ministry, Bogotá, March 2020.

¹⁶² "We take preventive measures, for example police patrols around a person's house or cards explaining suggestions for self-protection". Crisis Group interview, official, National Police, February 2020.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, social leader, Soacha, January and February 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, social leader for a women's shelter, Soacha, January 2020.

¹⁶⁵ "Comments to the National Conversation", Interior Minister Alicia Arango, 9 March 2020. The Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights also compiles weekly statistics on violence for the president. "Plan de Acción Oportuna de Prevención y Protección de los Defensores de Derechos Humanos, Líderes Sociales, Comunes y Periodistas", Interior Ministry, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Plan for Opportune Action attendee, February 2020. The Plan's focus on short-term protection was at the centre of a legal case brought by civil society to the Constitutional Court, which ruled in December 2019 that the government has not done enough to ensure leaders' protection.

¹⁶⁷ "You can actually revictimise people by asking them to denounce, because there is never an investigation and they can actually put themselves at greater risk". Crisis Group interview, former Ombudsman official, Bogotá, January 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, official, Ombudsman, January 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, female community leader, Soacha, February 2020.

alerts since 2017 have included specific references to threatened social leaders.¹⁷⁰ The interior ministry is meant to coordinate a response each time the Ombudsman issues an alert. Ministry officials, however, say personnel are overstretched and unable to follow up with the large quantity of active commitments.¹⁷¹

C. Protection Schemes for Social Leaders

Protection schemes – including everything from bulletproof jackets to armoured cars and bodyguards – were initially intended as the last resort for the most endangered leaders. But as the number of threatened figures has continued to rise, and authorities have been unable to investigate threats quickly enough to thwart them, the government has deployed thousands of these measures.¹⁷² As of May 2020, 4,966 social leaders had state-provided security, representing 69 per cent of all people provided with such schemes in Colombia.¹⁷³ This infrastructure works in many settings, particularly urban areas, though it may create some new risks and is far from foolproof.¹⁷⁴ Some leaders with protection appreciate the buffer against attacks but still worry that it places a target on their backs. As one indigenous leader suggested: “Any car from the [government protection agency] is now a military objective [for armed groups]”.¹⁷⁵

The National Protection Unit is responsible for assigning and managing protection schemes, spending much of its \$250 million budget protecting social leaders. Police, local authorities, the state Ombudsman or the UN can recommend cases to the unit, which evaluates their merit. Risk studies often take months and risk analysts rarely recommend urgent interim protection.¹⁷⁶ Each completed risk analysis is brought before a weekly meeting of the Committee for Evaluation of Risk and Recommendations for Collective Measures which determines if and what protection should be provided in as many as 350 cases per week. Security schemes vary enormously, from a mobile phone or self-protection course to a panic button and a bulletproof jacket. More at-risk leaders might be relocated within their region and given one or more

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Ombudsman, April 2020. In addition to territorial alerts related to risks for social leaders, the Ombudsman issued a nationwide alert warning of systematic threats in 2018. “Alerta Temprana 026-18”, Ombudsman, 28 February 2018; and “Informe de Seguimiento Alerta Temprana 026-18”, Ombudsman, August 2019.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, official, Interior Ministry, March 2020. The Inter-agency Commission for a Rapid Response to Early Warnings coordinates early warning follow-up.

¹⁷² As of November 2019, just three individuals had ever been sentenced for the crime of threatening a social leader. Crisis Group interview, official, Attorney General's Office, November 2019.

¹⁷³ “Testimony before the Second Committee of the House of Representatives”, Daniel Palacios, National Protection Unit acting director, video, YouTube, 19 May 2020. More than 900 leaders have armoured cars, while 4,300 of the state's 6,668 bodyguards protect leaders.

¹⁷⁴ There are instances of murders of individuals under protection schemes, for example the 29 September 2019 assassination of Karina García, an activist and candidate for mayor of Suárez municipality in Cauca. García and four other social leaders were stopped on the road and shot while driving in a car with her security detail.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, indigenous guard coordinator, Caloto, February 2020.

¹⁷⁶ “Testimony before the Second Committee of the House of Representatives”, op. cit. In 2019, the state reported 333 requests for emergency three-month protection, 253 of them for social leaders.

bodyguards, while the most imperilled are moved into town with armoured cars, a fuel allowance and a basic income.¹⁷⁷

While details of security schemes are kept confidential, officials familiar with the system suggest that a significant proportion of leaders under protection are asked to relocate.¹⁷⁸ In those instances, safeguarding a social leader can undermine that community's interests. To avoid having to abandon their homes and the causes they advocate, many social leaders have refrained from requesting security, instead creating their own informal coordination networks and community early warning systems.¹⁷⁹

The interior ministry also assigned collective protection to 34 groups in 2019, through schemes that largely mirrored individual protection provisions – for example, giving a civil society organisation an armoured car or self-protection training for its staff.¹⁸⁰ Communities that are not registered as NGOs report particular challenges in meeting the conditions to qualify for protection, such as providing original copies of police reports documenting past threats to the group.¹⁸¹ The protection unit is involved in reforms aimed at ensuring that it allocates more collective protection schemes.¹⁸²

D. Judicial Investigations

There is agreement across Colombia's political spectrum that judicial probes into violence against social leaders are falling short.¹⁸³ Despite improvements, impunity is the rule for those who orchestrate these crimes. By late 2019, the Attorney General's Office said it had established the assailant's identity in 55 per cent of cases against human rights defenders.¹⁸⁴ Compared to the equivalent statistic for all national homicides – roughly 28 per cent – this identification rate points to substantial progress. Even so, few of those cases have led to convictions, and even fewer to sentences for the masterminds rather than just the individuals who pulled the trigger on another's orders.¹⁸⁵

The Attorney General's Office acknowledges the challenges it faces and is working to improve its ability to pin down the individuals who order the killings. A special

¹⁷⁷ These stipends are usually a proportion of the national minimum wage, for example half the minimum wage per month, or three times the minimum wage per month. Crisis Group interviews, officials, National Police, Bogotá, February 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, official involved in evaluating security schemes for social leaders, National Police, Bogotá, February 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Women leaders, in particular, reported a preference for operating without security schemes, in part out of concern for risks and social stigma attached to moving around with unknown men as bodyguards. Crisis Group interviews, women leaders, Cauca and Soacha, January and February 2020. "If we get protection, will we be more or less able to do our work? Less, for sure". Crisis Group interview, women's rights advocate, Soacha, January 2020.

¹⁸⁰ Decisions are taken through the Committee for Evaluation of Risk and Recommendations for Collective Measures.

¹⁸¹ "Formulario Solicitudes de Protección Colectiva", National Protection Unit, 18 May 2020.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, official, Interior Ministry, Bogotá, March 2020.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, members of the Senate and House of Representatives from the Democratic Centre, Democratic Pole, Green Party and Radical Change, Bogotá, 2019 and 2020.

¹⁸⁴ "Informe sobre victimización a personas defensoras de derechos humanos", op. cit. This category includes many (though not all) social leaders.

¹⁸⁵ A total of 61 individuals have been convicted for their role in these crimes since 2016. Ibid. Crisis Group interview, Attorney General's Office, Bogotá, November 2019.

investigative unit for human rights defenders, now staffed with more than 100 people, has sought to bring its work up to international standards with EU support. It has created rapid response units that can deploy to remote crime scenes from Bogotá, and investigators are increasingly deployed to the field permanently.¹⁸⁶ The special unit coordinates with prosecutors working on organised crime, enabling investigators to connect attacks upon human rights defenders or other citizens.¹⁸⁷ The unit has launched eleven investigations aimed at linking cases to particular armed groups in a single municipality or region. Three serial perpetrators of violence against social leaders and six alleged Gaitanistas involved in assassinations were arrested in the first six months of 2020.¹⁸⁸

Coordination between local and national investigators is not always fluid, however, and communities and independent observers note that armed groups have been able to infiltrate some local prosecutors' offices.¹⁸⁹ A high caseload limits what is possible: "The capacity of prosecutors cannot match the speed of homicides in this country".¹⁹⁰

Cases that advance to judicial hearings face additional challenges. Investigators say witnesses who were willing to speak with prosecutors may be scared to do so in court as there is often little protection from reprisal.¹⁹¹ Judges in high-conflict regions are overburdened and public defenders are in short supply to represent the accused.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Attorney General's Office, June 2020. "Informe sobre victimización a personas defensoras de derechos humanos", op. cit.

¹⁸⁷ "Directivo No. 0002", Attorney General's Office, 30 November 2017. Most probes undertaken by the unit are referred from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Prosecutors require a causal link between the person's human rights work and attacks against him or her. Leaders killed for other reasons are investigated as plain homicides. Civil society groups say this practice excludes cases that appear to be trivial disputes but are linked to local power and criminal structures. Crisis Group interviews, official, Attorney General's Office, Bogotá, November 2019; international official, Bogotá, March 2020.

¹⁸⁸ "Proyectos de investigación", Attorney General's Office, 8 July 2020. Drug trafficker José Albeiro Arrigui, alias "Contador", was captured on 22 February 2020. He was reportedly the culprit in social leader killings in Nariño. On 10 April, FARC dissident Abel Antonio Loaiza Quiñonez, alias "Azul", was arrested for similar crimes in Putumayo. On 15 July, the Attorney General's Office said a regional investigation in Chocó into the 30 March 2019 death of Anquilleito Mecheche led to six men being charged. On 16 July, Domingo Ramos Cortés, alias "Hermes", was apprehended in Huila on charges of several social leader murders.

¹⁸⁹ "Many armed groups have people in the prosecution service who pass them information, so investigating someone powerful or masterminds is very hard, when you are up against someone who knows and has a budget much larger than yours". Crisis Group interview, member of international organisation, March 2020.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, official, Attorney General's Office, Bogotá, November 2019. A survey in Chocó, Córdoba and Antioquia revealed single investigators managing up to 50 cases a year. "Cuellos de botella en la administración judicial: Un caso de estudio en la investigación y juzgamiento de crímenes contra derechos humanos", Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, June 2020.

¹⁹¹ This risk has been acute in the pandemic as local prosecutors electronically send sensitive testimony to judges. Crisis Group telephone interview, security official, Antioquia, September 2020.

¹⁹² In 2019, President Duque announced that his administration would form a special circuit of judges for crimes against social leaders to address some of these challenges. The proposed circuit is not yet hearing cases, however. "Presidente Duque anuncia creación de cuerpo de jueces para la 'rápida judicialización y condena ejemplarizante de los asesinos de nuestros líderes sociales'", Colombian Presidency, 7 May 2019.

VII. Recommendations

The pandemic appears to be exacerbating patterns of violence against social leaders. Many key components of the peace agreement, such as rural reform, coca substitution and community economic development, were delayed even before the national health crisis threw up new obstacles. Recession will likely hit the most vulnerable first, worsening inequalities in wealth and security. The state should spend more of its admittedly stretched resources to protect social leaders and their communities. Diplomats in Bogotá and at the UN Security Council, as well as foreign legislators, have repeatedly expressed their concern over social leaders' plight and its impact on peace in Colombia, but their remonstrations to date have not translated into a shift in government strategy.¹⁹³

A. *A Security Pivot to Enable Peace*

The 2016 peace accord offers a comprehensive package of reforms aimed at ending Colombia's conflict in the long term. Rural reform is particularly important to break small farmers' dependence on the illicit economy and loosen the grip of armed groups. According to one social leader, "there is no other product [than coca] that is viable" in many isolated areas without access to tertiary roads and consistent buyers for legal crops.¹⁹⁴

Several initiatives already under way could help in this process without adding budgetary strain. In August, Duque signed into law a bill requiring all state bodies – from the military to public hospitals – to purchase a certain percentage of food from local farmers in the area where they are operating.¹⁹⁵ If the logistics are in place to implement these provisions, state buyers could generate a new guaranteed market for local producers who otherwise struggle to break even.

Other essential reforms could spur rural growth and employment at a time when the country's economy is facing a severe contraction, for example building roads to connect more farmers to markets. Stipulations that contractors in these projects hire local labour could stimulate legal job opportunities. The peace accord also laid out a plan to redistribute land to small farmers, which is crucial to addressing poverty and ensuring the livelihoods of rural communities. Although the government has increased the acreage of land available for redistribution, only a small number of plots have been doled out.¹⁹⁶

In order to advance, such reforms would require trust and cooperation of social leaders and their communities. That, in turn, means that social leaders need to know that the government does not view rural peace and well-being as secondary to other

¹⁹³ See, for example, Representatives James P. McGovern and Mark Pocan, "Letter to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo: Human Rights Defenders in the Time of COVID", 6 July 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, social leader from Afro-descendant community, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020. Armed groups in this area distribute seeds, pay in advance for the crop, and collect the harvest, reducing transport costs for the producer.

¹⁹⁵ "Con sanción de Ley, pequeños campesinos se vinculan efectivamente a compras públicas de la Nación", press release, Colombian Presidency, 6 August 2020.

¹⁹⁶ "En audiencia convocada por la Procuraduría el Gobierno asumió compromisos frente a la protección de los campesinos y el derecho a la tierra", press release, Inspector General's Office, 31 July 2020.

security or economic goals. As seen, offensive operations against armed groups often fail to take into account their unintended impact on citizens' safety, especially in peripheral and conflict-affected areas. Security forces should seek to ensure that military operations do not exacerbate violence against locals, particularly social leaders.¹⁹⁷ If the military can safely consult with communities about their security needs, they should do so before undertaking offensive operations. Where they cannot – due to the presence of an armed group that might retaliate against civilians for speaking with the military – the armed forces should treat the community as they would a hostage, avoiding attacks that could bring reprisal.

Without abandoning the goal of dismantling armed groups, Colombia should offer their members realistic pathways back into civilian life through negotiated collective demobilisation. Colombia's recent decision to allow individual demobilisation from armed and criminal groups is a step in the right direction but may have limited appeal, as it may expose ex-combatants to grave security risks and retaliation from former comrades. Colombia's vast experience with demobilisation over the last two decades also suggests that programs focused on individual fighters see a higher rate of relapse as they rely heavily on combatants' personal motivation.¹⁹⁸ Collective demobilisation should be available for all combatants, as it was for the former paramilitary blocs and later the FARC.

B. *Protecting Leaders Now*

While these deeper reforms take hold, the National Protection Unit should update protection strategies, both to adapt to the realities of the health crisis and to ensure greater sustainability in the medium term.

During the pandemic and with mobility restricted, communities are their own first responders. The government should do more to support their existing initiatives. Indigenous and ethnic areas have their own, legally protected unarmed guards.¹⁹⁹ Some guards have requested personal protective and sanitary equipment so that they can continue monitoring incidents of violence during the health crisis.²⁰⁰ The National Protection Unit could speed up the process allowing social leaders to propose their own bodyguards, often community members who would not be affected by virus-related travel restrictions. Authorities should also fast-track the review aimed at pro-

¹⁹⁷ Troubled urban neighbourhoods provide an illustration of what a pivot in security policy might look like. At present, the military and police focus on prohibiting drugs and apprehending armed group members. Local officials suggest that they instead work to create safe spaces where communities could exercise their rights and freedom – for example, showing a visible presence in parks to create a sense of safety and along roads to ensure that they are accessible. Crisis Group interview, local government official, Soacha, March 2020.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior official, National Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation, October 2019. Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia", *Journal of Conflict Research*, vol. 62, no. 1 (May 2016), p. 64.

¹⁹⁹ Colombia's 1991 constitution established the principle of ethnic autonomy, through which indigenous and ethnic communities can perform certain functions independently, including providing security in indigenous reserves and education in native languages and with a culturally appropriate curriculum. See "Constitución Política de Colombia", Articles 7, 68, 246 and 330.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, Nasa indigenous authority official, March 2020.

tecting more endangered communities. Social leaders who work to stop armed group recruitment suggested that protection in their neighbourhoods would require safe after-school recreation for youth.²⁰¹ Collective protection could also involve setting up a rapid response protocol for emergencies or installing cell phone towers to ensure that rural areas can communicate if they come under threat.²⁰² Such initiatives could save more lives while relieving the financial and logistical burden of the individual protection system.

At the same time, the government should focus on improving the complex process through which targets report threats and violence. Filing a crime report should be simple, take less than a day and be available through a range of trusted interlocutors. At the moment, lack of trust between communities, on one hand, and the police or prosecutors, on the other, limits willingness to report. The Attorney General's office and the police should allow crime reporting through other trusted institutions, including the national state Ombudsman. State bodies might also consider crime reports that come through the UN or other independent organisations, and allow for anonymous reports, as they sometimes do on an ad hoc basis.²⁰³ Prosecutors should also consider how to improve crime report collection from rural areas inaccessible by road. Threatened rural leaders in Amazonas, for example, need to journey to the capital to get support, often requiring several days and incurring a high cost in boat fuel.²⁰⁴

Bolstering local Ombudsman offices (*personerías*) would be particularly helpful to facilitate reporting. Almost all municipal capitals have a *personero* whose office is charged with protecting local human rights, but these are often underfunded and understaffed. They could form a crucial bridge between communities and security and judicial institutions. In Soacha, for example, the *personería* attempted, with limited success, to create a route through which it could transmit crime or harassment reports to the local government secretary, then to the Attorney General's Office and the National Protection Unit.²⁰⁵

C. Tackling Impunity

Violence against social leaders persists in part because perpetrators perceive it to be tolerated. Until there is a price to be paid, the killings are likely to continue. For those who give the order, assassination is a relatively low-risk crime that can pay off handsomely in silencing a community or even sparking its displacement from a contested piece of land. For hit men, the payment for a homicide may be more alluring than the risk – likely several months or years away – of being charged with a crime.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, social leader, Soacha, February 2020; social leader, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020; member of international monitoring organisation, Cali, February 2020.

²⁰² “La Protección Colectiva de los Defensores del Derecho a la Tierra y el Territorio en Colombia”, *Protection International* and *Pensamiento y Acción Social*, 2018.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, official, National Police, Bogotá, February 2020. An online platform launched for crime reports during the pandemic is a step in this direction, though many victims lack internet service. See “Comunicado”, Attorney General's Office, 11 May 2020.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, academic in Amazonas, June 2020.

²⁰⁵ The route was less successful than officials hoped, which they attribute to an uneven level of commitment across state institutions. Crisis Group interview, senior official, Personería of Soacha, February 2020.

Investigations could benefit from a stronger ground presence of the Attorney General's Office, which has representatives in about half of all municipalities. Attorney General Francisco Barbosa Delgado pledged to expand into 200 more of Colombia's 1,103 municipalities upon taking up his post in February.²⁰⁶ But these efforts will fall short if the scope of justice is limited solely to resolving social leaders' killings without linking them to a wider set of crimes and the universe of complicity surrounding them. Culprits may be responsible for other murders, threats or forced displacement that affect other community members, while local politicians or economic elites may benefit indirectly from silencing civil activism. The Attorney General's Office has begun to connect multiple crimes in some regions but should attempt to implement this methodology more widely. To do so, it will have to address local-level corruption among its prosecutors and ensure physical protection for investigators should they dare to poke below the surface of a case.

²⁰⁶ "Este es el discurso completo de Francisco Barbosa al posesionarse como fiscal", *El Heraldo*, 13 February 2020.

VIII. Conclusion

Colombia's peace agreement outlined a host of reforms that would whittle away the causes of conflict. For social leaders, implementation of this accord has become both a golden opportunity to transform their communities and an enormous personal risk. Entrenched interests, whether armed groups, criminal entrepreneurs, or certain business or political elites, have for decades tolerated violence that preserves their positions. At the same time, persistent violence targeting community leaders has contributed to undermining public confidence in the government's ability to deliver peace. The COVID-19 pandemic may prove a further setback. A health emergency in Colombia's conflict-affected areas could sharpen the feeling of abandonment by Bogotá, leaving local activists and leaders with the burden of shepherding their communities with ever fewer resources at their disposal.

While the Duque administration has devoted considerable attention to protecting endangered individuals, its strategy has on occasion exposed leaders to greater danger. Security details label them as unmistakable targets. Military and police operations aimed at corralling and defeating armed groups, which are themselves responsible for many social leaders' killings, can heighten antagonism and violence within communities. Cumbersome bureaucracy, slow-moving judicial cases, the difficulty of prosecuting criminal masterminds and corruption in public office – all longstanding failings in the Colombian state and judiciary – stymie the effectiveness of the government's response and reinforce public suspicions that too little is being done to protect the grassroots of democracy.

Colombia has one thing working in its favour that should not be underestimated: will from across the political spectrum to end targeted violence. Despite different diagnoses of the problem, the government, opposition and civil society agree that killings must end, and that social leaders are a vital part of consolidating peace. But without a faster and farther-reaching response that both safeguards and enables their work, social leaders and the Colombian public may lose faith in the very peace process meant to protect them.

Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 6 October 2020

Appendix A: Map of Colombia



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Principality of Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and the World Bank.

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October 2020

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