

Brussels, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2019

## **High risk of killings, forced displacement and confinement of land claimants in the Bajo Atrato area of Colombia**

The International office for Human Rights – Action Colombia (*Oficina Internacional de Derechos Humanos - Acción Colombia - Oidhaco*) expresses its deep concern about the presence of clashes between armed actors in the Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó river basins (Urabá region, north-west of Colombia) threatening and attacking the physical and emotional integrity of the Afro-Colombian, mixed ethnicity and indigenous communities in the region.

In the last two weeks there have been multiple reports of members of the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia - AGC*) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN*) entering the Humanitarian and Biodiversity Zones in these river basin areas, including in the presence of an international organisation which is a member of Oidhaco, threatening and besieging the members of communities who are already victims of many cases of violence and crimes against humanity over the years.

Despite numerous complaints to the Colombian authorities by these rural communities and the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (*Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz - CIJP*) that accompanies them, the civilian population is in the midst of clashes between legal and illegal armed actors, showing the expansion of the territorial control of the AGC and the ELN in the collective territories of the Bajo Atrato (Urabá), however, to date there has not been an adequate response on the part of the Colombian State in terms of prevention and protection.

These events are taking place amid the stagnation of the land restitution process, which compounds the lack of guarantees for the river-basin communities. It is important to remember that in December 2017, two historical land restitution leaders from the region, Mario Castaño and Hernán Bedoya, were killed. Both had previously been threatened, after they reported economic interests in their territories and resisted forced displacement. The results of the investigation into these murders and the intellectual authors of the crimes are still unknown.

It is also worth noting that the communities of the Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó river basins are recipients of demobilised former combatants from the former Farc-Ep guerrilla, and are also contributing information and testimonies to the mechanisms of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Repetition.

Moreover, at the beginning of February this year, reports broke of a plot to attack the CIJP, an organisation that accompanies the communities in their demands for the defence of their human rights and the restitution of their lands. The CIJP and several of the communities directly affected by these events are beneficiaries of precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which were extended in February 2018.

In light of the above, we urgently ask the European Union, its member States, Switzerland and Norway to call upon the Colombian government to:

- **Convene immediately a civil and humanitarian mission to verify these events**, composed of members of the Ombudsman's Office, the Ministry of the Interior and the Presidential Council, as well as the diplomatic corps and other relevant international organisations.
- **Make progress to clarify all crimes committed in the region**, including murders and threats against land claimants, as well as cases of land dispossession, ensuring that this information contributes to the System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Repetition. This includes progress in investigations by the Special Investigation Unit for the Dismantling of the paramilitary successor groups regarding the responsibility of criminal structures with political and economic interests in the region, in particular in the case of the murders of Mario Castaño and Hernán Bedoya.
- **Investigate independently and without delay complaints regarding the plot to attack members of the CIJP** (in particular its Legal Representative, Danilo Rueda, and the members of the Bajo Atrato team) **and leaders from the region.**

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