

International civil society organisations urge the Colombian Government to guarantee the peaceful exercise of the legitimate right to public assembly and social protest, enshrined in the Colombian Political Constitution and to protect the lives of those who exercise it.



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Peaceful demonstrations by Colombian citizens started on 28 April 2021 in various cities and municipalities across the country, within the framework of the National strike. The legitimate right to defend human rights, and the right to public assembly and social protest, are enshrined in article 37 of the Political Constitution.¹

In this sense, the excessive use of force by some members of the Security Forces is unacceptable. According to the figures published by the “Campaign to Defend Freedoms Affecting All”² in its newsletter No.4³, between 28 and 30 April 2021, 105 people were injured (6 of them with eye injuries and 4 firearms injuries), 4 people were killed, apparently 3 were minors, over 150 arbitrary detentions that included several people under 18 years of age, over 232 physical assaults, 9 raids in Cali and Bogotá, three acts of sexual violence against women in Bogotá, Cali and Medellín, two of them by ESMAD (riot police) officials and one by a forensic medical examiner. Likewise, acts of torture have been reported, including beatings, threats, electric shocks. Acts of obstruction of the right to information and several people have been reported missing.

We are concerned about the denouncements regarding the intervention of the Colombian Army in the social protests, as occurred in the municipality of Bello (Antioquia) and in the department of Cali, where, according to the words of the Minister of Defence, 300 soldiers⁴ were sent, as well as the announcement made by the President of the Republic to militarize the cities.⁵

¹ Artículo 37. Toda parte del pueblo puede reunirse y manifestarse pública y pacíficamente. Sólo la ley podrá establecer de manera expresa los casos en los cuales se podrá limitar el ejercicio de este derecho.

² Different human rights organisations that have formed a network in an attempt to monitor and ensure protection of human rights in social protests

³ <https://defenderlalibertad.com/boletin-informativo-4-paronacional/>

⁴ Ministerio de Defensa, cuenta twitter @mindefensa, 29 de abril de 2021. Disponible en: <https://bit.ly/3ugdFzK>

⁵ <https://www.aa.com.tr/es/mundo/iv%C3%A1n-duque-anuncia-que-mantendr%C3%A1-asistencia-militar-frente-a-la-grave-alteraci%C3%B3n-del-orden-p%C3%BAblico-en-colombia/2226961>

As international civil society organizations, we ask the Colombian State to urgently adopt measures to protect life, personal integrity, personal freedom, due process, freedom of expression, freedom of association, the right to assembly, the right to participation and other rights and fundamental principles recognised in the American Convention on Human Rights, which are at serious risk due to the events described above.

Additionally, in a country where, according to the Dane⁶, 21 million people (42.5% of the national population) are below the monetary poverty line⁷, and are facing daily difficulties in accessing food which is creating the conditions for a food crisis, during the context of a health crisis, the Colombian State should take measures to protect their rights.

As international civil society organizations we request that:

- The diplomatic community and the United Nations ask the Colombian State to provide sufficient guarantees for the exercise of the legitimate right to social protest. As well as, promoting dialogue in order to take constructive actions to overcoming the current state of the human rights crisis across the country
- The Security Forces exercise their constitutional role of providing security conditions, in order that the majority, that are discontented and desperate due to poverty, disease and conflict find conditions to demonstrate peacefully.
- The political parties, trade unions and churches to strengthen their actions to summon the government to take measures in favor of the dignity of life and to refrain from issuing stigmatising statements
- The minority of people using violent actions as a vehicle of protest to create confusion and delegitimise legitimate protest, stop their actions, including those carried out through social networks. Violence generates violence. This lesson suffered during so many years of conflict must be learnt.

We ask the President to take all the necessary measures to stop the bloodbath that Colombia is experiencing, and in line with this, order an immediate stop to the actions of armed repression of the peaceful protest and the militarisation of the cities, which have cost the life of many, particularly young people in Colombia, and generate opportunities for consultation with dissatisfied citizens in Colombia. The withdrawal of the tax reform and the call to agree on a new proposal is a positive step along this path.

As international civil society organisations, we continue to be on Alert for a Colombia in Peace, and we reiterate our commitment to a peaceful solution to the conflict in Colombia.

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⁶ <https://www.portafolio.co/economia/dane-revela-impacto-de-la-pandemia-en-la-pobreza-del-pais-551470>

⁷ Of these 3.5 million were incorporated in 2020