



Colombia : Unprecedented crackdown on protesters

News release

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Two months into mostly peaceful protests, members of Colombia’s law enforcement continue committing serious and widespread human rights violations, as detailed in a new briefing. Colombian human rights organisations and members of the NGO-LAC Group in Geneva¹, **joined by over 300 civil society organisations from around the world**, call on the Human Rights Council, which is currently meeting in Geneva, to condemn the brutal repression and ask for an independent investigation. The joint declaration follows another globally supported call by human rights groups at the beginning of the ongoing Council session, [urging the international community to act](#) on Colombia.

“Police violence is not new in Colombia, as we saw in September 2020, when police tortured and killed a defenceless citizen, then killed another 13 in the following days”, said Ana María Rodríguez, deputy director of the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ). *“What is unprecedented is the scale of the crackdown and the sheer cruelty by law enforcement officials, including extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual assault, and the enforced disappearance of hundreds of peaceful protesters”,* added Óscar Ramírez, lawyer of the Campaign Defender La Libertad: un asunto de todas.

From the start of the protests on April 28th to June 28th, 83 [homicides](#) have been reported, including at least 27 civilians killed by ordinary and riot police (ESMAD). A significant number of deaths have been attributed to armed civilians, often acting with the complicity of law enforcement officials. Eighty people have suffered eye injuries and another 114 gunshot wounds. Over 3,200 have been arbitrarily detained without basic procedural safeguards, exposing them to torture and other ill-treatment. Members of the mentioned Campaign speak of beatings, punching with blunt objects, electric shocks, threats of imminent execution, forced nudity, and sexual and gender-based violence, including rape. Many of these allegations are not being investigated and the involvement of the military justice system in criminal investigations and proceedings is equally concerning.

Of particular concern is the practice of enforced disappearance, with detained people transferred to unauthorized places of detention, such as shopping malls, schools, and public transport stations, and held incommunicado for up to 36 hours. To date, 327 people are still unaccounted for, with the authorities denying that about half of these disappearances ever took place.

Attacks have particularly targeted groups in a situation of heightened vulnerability, such as indigenous people, members of the LGBTIQ community, as well as human rights defenders, journalists, and doctors treating injured protesters. Even a fact-finding mission by human rights groups accompanied by officials of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia was threatened and shot at by police in Cali, on May 3rd.

Another dangerous practice is the indiscriminate use of “less-lethal” weapons, such as launchers of multiple projectiles located on tanks (Venom), which can in fact have lethal effects.

“The protest movement is rooted in poverty, extremely high levels of inequality, and systemic racism”, said Gerald Staberock, Secretary General of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), which is a member of the NGO-LAC Group. *“Instead of seeking a peaceful solution to the situation, the government has denied most of the abuse*

¹ The NGO-LAG Group in Geneva is composed of the following organisations: Centre for Civil and Political Rights (CCPR Centre), Dominicans for Justice and Peace, FIAN International, Franciscans International (FI), International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights (Race & Equality), International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Peace Brigades International (PBI), Red Internacional de Derechos Humanos (RIDH), World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT).



by law enforcement and focused on delegitimizing protesters, including by likening them to terrorists. This, together with the militarisation of the response and the involvement of armed civilians, reminds of the darkest hours of Colombia's conflict."

Over 300 human rights groups ask today States meeting at the United Nations Human Rights Council to call for an investigation and to urge the Colombian authorities to take the necessary measures to respect and guarantee the right to life and other basic human rights in the context of protests.

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