

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

AI Index: AMR 23/055/2013

24 December 2013

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/colombia-peace-still-far-away-here-2013-12-23>

Colombia: 'Peace is still far away from here'

"Peace is still far away from our community," says Jesús Emilio Tuberquia, with his calm, deep peasant farmer's voice, staring intensely as he speaks.

Jesús Emilio is one of the leaders of San José de Apartadó Peace Community, in Apartadó municipality, in the northern Colombian department of Antioquia.

A group of over 1,500 peasants came together 17 years ago to set up this community.

"We told the paramilitaries, the guerilla and the army: 'We don't want to take part in this. We don't want to get involved with any of you. We don't want either to kill or to be killed'."

Unfortunately, their demands were not heard. All the parties to the Colombian conflict have been deaf to the peace community's plea. Since its foundation, more than 200 of the community's members have been killed or forcibly disappeared.

These severe human rights violations have been committed mainly by paramilitaries often operating in collusion with the security forces. The community has been also targeted by the guerrilla forces and the Colombia army. It is an ongoing pattern.

Last November a group of the Community's representatives visited Amnesty International's headquarters in London. They had just suffered the forced disappearance of one of their members. While in the UK's capital, they learned of the possible forced disappearance of another seven people living in the area of San Jose de Apartadó. Thankfully, they were released a week later.

One of the bloodiest attacks that San José de Apartadó Peace Community has ever suffered took place in February 2005. Eight of its members - including three children - were killed by paramilitaries acting in complicity with members of the security forces.

Days after the massacre, the then Colombian President, Álvaro Uribe, attempted to justify it, saying that some of the peace community members had links with the guerrillas.

"Uribe's statement was a blatant attempt to blame and defame the civilian victims of the armed conflict," says Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International's researcher on Colombia.

It took eight years and a Constitutional Court ruling, before the current President Manuel Santos finally stated that Uribe's words were a mistake.

"Nobody should stigmatize those who search for peace and reject violence," said Santos for San José de Apartadó's forgiveness.

The Colombian President framed his words in the context of the current peace process Colombia is going through: "I ask forgiveness with the certainty that forgiveness is a precondition for peace."

"The apology is not the main issue. The Court's ruling told the government to set up a protection plan for the community. This plan has never been implemented," says Marcelo Pollack.

When we asked Jesús Emilio Tuberquia about the ongoing peace talks in the Cuban capital Havana between Colombian government and the main Colombian guerilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), he spoke with a bitter touch of skepticism in his voice: "They say they're talking of peace, but we don't see any peace in our lives," he said.

"President Santos says constantly that the situation is improving, but it's not. The threats and the violence are still part of our everyday life," says Jesús Emilio.

He immediately adds: "Whenever they kill one of our members, the situation gets worse, because it's one more person that has been killed. Nobody can bring this person back to life".

Looking at the situation of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community it is hard to believe that peace and respect for human rights and International Humanitarian Law is close at hand in Colombia.

Jesús Emilio points to history to reinforce the community's skeptical point of view: "The government said seven years ago that the paramilitary groups had been disbanded, but we're still suffering violence on a daily basis. They go on killing our people. Why should we believe a government that has lied and is still lying to us over and over again?"

"The paramilitaries are still threatening the lives and the rights of people all across the country – trade unionists, indigenous and peasant leaders and land restitution claimants, among others," said Marcelo Pollack.

Jesús Emilio makes clear that the San José de Apartadó Peace Community desperately wants peace. "Peace is what we have been saying we want for the last 17 years, but nobody has listened to us so far."

Despite his skepticism, he hopes that peace talks in Havana will bring some positive developments for Colombia. But he points out that true peace needs also justice.

The problem is that in Colombia impunity for severe human rights violations and abuses is almost an unwritten law. While peace seems to be a distant dream, the road to justice seems to be even longer.

"The government's attempts to strengthen the military justice system and the promotion of other legal measures could lead to de facto amnesties for the perpetrators of massive human rights violations and abuses" says Marcelo Pollack.

For Jesús Emilio Tuberquia and his community, questions remain about the future of Colombia. But one thing is clear: the determination of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community people to peacefully resist and defend their right to live without violence will continue.