

URGENT ACTION

STOP STIGMATISING CIVIL SOCIETY IN CATATUMBO

On March 3, President Gustavo Petro stated that civil society organisations of Catatumbo are “permeated” and “subordinated” to armed groups. Besides being unjustified and unacceptable, this statement endangers the members of these organisations and legitimises the violence they, as well as the civilian population of Catatumbo in general, have been enduring since mid-January. Several Colombian human rights organisations have called on the President to retract on these remarks. We urge President Petro to stop making such stigmatising statements and, instead, be open to dialogue and to the participation of local organisations in the implementation of human rights centred solutions to the Catatumbo crisis.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Gustavo Petro Urrego
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Dear Mr. President

I am writing to express my deep concern about the serious risks to the life, safety, and security of the civilian population in the Catatumbo region of Colombia, particularly human rights defenders and members of local civil society organisations. These individuals and their organisations are especially affected by your statements during the public national cabinet meeting on March 3, in which you claimed that civil society organizations in Catatumbo are “permeated” and “subordinated” to armed groups in the region.

Such words put members of civil society organisations, including human rights defenders, at grave risk in a region that has endured decades of armed conflict, where accusations of collaborating with one faction or another have costed many lives. Your declarations contradict international and national legislation recommending public officials to refrain from making statements stigmatising human rights defenders, which contributes to further endanger them and affects their valuable work. Your statements also contradict your own Presidential Directive 07 of 2023, instructing the entire Colombian government to support and recognise the work of human rights defenders.

For years, human rights defenders and civil society organisations have faced violence and hostility in Colombia, including in the Catatumbo, a region marked by extreme poverty, high levels of militarisation and armed violence, the negative impacts of forced coca eradication, the absence of support for economic alternatives, and the lack of access to essential services such as healthcare, food, education, water, and housing. State policies have failed to guarantee the population’s economic and social rights.

In recent years, and especially since the outbreak of the current violent crisis in mid-January, local civil society organisations of Catatumbo, including CISCA, ASCAMCAT, the MCP, and ASUNCAT, have consistently called for peace, respect for international humanitarian law, and structural solutions based on a stronger presence of civilian State institutions, as outlined in the recently signed Social Pact for the Territorial Transformation of Catatumbo.

I urge you to retract on your statements and refrain from further stigmatising civil society organisations of Catatumbo. Instead, I ask that you to recognise their work and ensure their active participation in implementing measures to overcome the region’s crisis by strengthening the civilian presence of the State, providing long-overdue public services to the people of Catatumbo, and ultimately protecting their human rights.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Located in the north-east of Colombia, in the Norte de Santander department, the Catatumbo region stretches between the Eastern Andes and the vicinities of Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela. This is a region rich in natural resources, particularly oil, and where extreme poverty, high levels of militarization and violence, and the lack of access to health, food, education, water and housing have created a hostile environment for social leadership and human rights defence activities. Furthermore, the region lacks infrastructure and connection with the rest of Colombia and remains as one of the primary enclaves of coca leaf crops and cocaine production in the country.

Amnesty International has followed the situation of violence against human rights defenders in the region for several years, focusing on the Catatumbo Social Integration Committee (CISCA). Since 2020, Amnesty International has pointed out that CISCA's human rights work has been hindered by two major collective risks factors: [high levels of violence in its area of influence, particularly against those in position of social leadership, and the activities of forced eradication of coca leaf crops](#). Amnesty International has also recognised that extreme poverty and lack of access to economic and social rights create a tense and hostile environment in the region, particularly for social leaders. By July 2023, Colombian authorities had ceased the coca leaf forced eradication operations and military activity relatively decreased in the region, both by State security forces and armed groups, but [the long history of militarisation and the humanitarian impact of the armed conflict had not allowed for a safe environment for social mobilisation and human rights work, considering that armed groups activities continued, even intensified, in neighbouring areas](#).

Since mid-January 2025, armed confrontations erupted between the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish) and dissident groups of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish) under the name of General Staff of Blocks and Front (EMBF in Spanish), seriously affecting the civilian population. On 18 January the Ombudsperson's Office reported 60 killings in Convención, Ábrego, Teorama, El Tarra, Hacarí and Tibú municipalities, forced displacements of Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities, and highlighted the special risk faced by human rights defenders, social leaders and former members of the FARC-EP demobilized in 2016, given public statements made by the ELN against them. By 18 February, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported approximately 80.000 people affected (including at least 47.000 children and 4.600 Venezuelan refugees), 52.000 of which were forcibly displaced 8.600 remained forcibly confined. The UNHCR stated that confrontations between armed groups and between them and Colombian security forces continued, risking further killings, massive forced displacements, forced confinements, and enforced disappearances.

Colombian authorities claim that their priority is protecting the civilian population and carried out emergency evacuation efforts. Human rights organisations of Catatumbo and at the national level have warned about the risk of a militarised response to this crisis, making calls for peace, for the respect of International Humanitarian Law, and for President Petro to support and implement structural solutions based on a stronger presence of civilian State institutions, such as the [Social Pact for the Territorial Transformation of Catatumbo](#), discussed during the last two years between State representatives and local civil society, and finally signed in Catatumbo on March 6.

However, in a national cabinet meeting broadcasted on national television on March 3 to announce the March 6 event in Catatumbo, President Petro' stigmatised the social organisations of the region saying they are "permeated" and "subordinated" to the armed groups, putting them at high risk. Armed groups frequently accuse local civil society of collaborating with rival factions to justify attacks against them. Furthermore, stigmatisation at the local level against social organisations has been increasing in social networks in the last weeks.

These remarks by the President, [strongly condemned](#) by Colombia's national human rights platforms, contradicted international recommendations, including those of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, that in the 5th recommendation of its Second Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas, stating that "Public officials must refrain from making statements that stigmatize human rights defenders or that suggest that human rights organizations act improperly or illegally merely because they engage in their work of promoting and protecting human rights." This principle was reaffirmed by Colombia's Constitutional Court in ruling SU-546 of 2023, which reminded the State's duty to foster an environment free from stigmatisation and to abstain from contributing to it. President Petro even contradicted his own Presidential Directive 07 of December 13, 2023, issued to instruct the entire Colombian government to support and recognise the work of human rights defenders.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Amnesty International has called for the protection of the civilian population through a first [Urgent Action](#) and a [Public Statement](#).

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Spanish.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 13 June 2025.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME: Civilians in Catatumbo [they / them]

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/8941/2025/en/>