



Organized crime in Colombia: What does it mean for religious minorities?

Special report

Teresa Flores Chiscul & Dennis P. Petri

2 July 2019

www.olire.org

Abstract

The social, political, and economic context of Colombia has been shaped for many years, among other things, by the internal armed conflict in its territory. The presence of diverse criminal groups has influenced the dynamics of violence. In the recent history of the country, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, *FARC-EP* [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army] and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, *ELN* [National Liberation Army] have been the two most important guerrilla groups on Colombian soil. While the atmosphere of violence has affected all spheres of society to varying degrees and at different levels, the objective of this report is to highlight the special challenges posed by violence for religious minorities.

Against this background, we will first describe the security context after the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC in 2016, and how this process has affected the human security of Colombian citizens (1.). We will then discuss the interaction of criminal groups with the peace building process (2.), after which we will explain the definition and characteristic features of the population groups that we will refer to as religious minorities (3.). Through an analysis of the cases reported by the Violent Incidents Database (VID) of the Observatory of Religious Freedom of Latin America, we will demonstrate how the religious behavior of religious minorities exposes them in a special way to human rights abuses, especially in the most convulsive and violent areas

of Colombia (4.). We will separately discuss the matter of persecution of Christian women (5.), before making concluding comments (6.).

1. Current security context of Colombia

Colombia finds itself in a post-peace agreement stage. The security dynamics in the country depend on the activities of the FARC, the guerrilla group involved in the process, but other factors should also be considered. In fact, multiple criminal groups and drug cartels converge in different areas of the country; as a result, the security of its inhabitants is threatened.

Criminal groups have triggered extremely violent events in the country; have been involved in the production, trafficking, and distribution of illegal drugs; and have carried out activities such as arms trafficking, money laundering, kidnapping, killings, and extortion. According to the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, the key actors engaged in these activities are the former FARC insurgency, members of the ELN, and other groups involved in the cultivation of coca (InSight Crime & Universidad del Rosario 2019).

In regards to the FARC, we must keep in mind that since 1982, several governments have attempted to reach peace agreements with the Colombian guerrillas. The most recent dialogue resulted in signing the official peace agreement between former President Juan Manuel Santos and delegates of the FARC. This process started in 2012 with dialogues in Oslo and Havana, and was finally formalized in 2016 through the *Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera* [Final agreement for the termination of the conflict and the construction of a stable and durable peace], and the conversion of the insurgent group into a political party (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016). It is not the intention of this report to assess the way in which the agreement was carried out, nor its content; we will only analyze how the peace-building process and the interaction of other criminal groups along the way, have impacted society, especially religious minorities.

Before moving forward, it is important to mention that the FARC with which the agreement was signed was not the FARC that started the armed conflict back in 1964. Small farmers and land workers, inspired by the Cuban revolution in the 1950's, banded together to fight against the levels of inequality and demanded more rights and control over the land, at a time of brutal repression against any form of action considered as subversive. The group was the armed wing of the Communist Party and a follower of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Its initial goals were to overthrow the Colombian State, establish a socialist government, redistribute land to the poor, empower the peasants, and develop the hinterlands in a socially just way, through the Protracted Popular War (Pino Montoya 2014).

Some analysts argue that as time went on, the engagement with the drug economy and other illicit activities meant the organization's motives started to rely more on profit—not ideology—and that they ceased to be a political insurgency to become allies of narco-traffickers and other criminal groups. Other analysts consider that the permanence and stability of the FARC within peasant communities did not depend solely on economic power or territorial control, but was also due to the indifference and neglect of the State in rural areas. Peasants had no other option

than to grow coca on their land; the FARC represented a government-like entity in many of these areas, providing people with the resources and the protection they needed to live (Baker 2018).

Regardless of how the FARC's nature is interpreted, it is undeniable that it conducted one of the longest armed conflicts in the country (fifty-two years), leaving a legacy of violence, weakened State institutions, widening of impunity and corruption, and countless victims of various other crimes.

Meanwhile, the ELN was only a small group of students and activists back in 1964. Like other illegal armed factions, it took advantage of the absence of the State and grew in influence in various areas of Colombia. The ideology of the ELN is also inspired by the Cuban revolution, mixing a Marxist-Leninist outlook with Catholic religious elements from liberation theology. Its agenda includes the use of armed struggle to denounce and promote solutions to the social needs of the people. However, over time, the ideological argument of the ELN has gradually faded; it now utilizes violence, kidnapping, and extortion as sources of leverage and income.

According to InSight Crime, the ELN has always been characterized by internal power struggles, maniacal leaders, and disorganization at the highest levels. It is not surprising that over the years, the ELN's modus operandi has evolved and increasingly autonomous factions have acted based more on criminal than on ideological grounds. As a result, for the last twenty years, the ELN's leadership has been advocating for a peace agreement with the government. The ELN demanded stipulations that include society being allowed to consult and participate in the reforms required for peace, however, this proposal is not shared by all of its members and fronts.¹ The last attempt to negotiate a peace agreement was interrupted because of the attacks perpetrated by the ELN against a school of police cadets in January 2019. In response, current president Ivan Duque ended the dialogue timetable and lifted the suspension of the arrest warrants for the ten ELN members who served as negotiators.² So far, the negotiations have not resumed.

Other groups identified in the country are also part of the context of violence. For instance, from the demobilization of the rightwing paramilitary *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, *AUC [United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia]*, multiple criminal groups linked to narco-trafficking emerged in Colombia, which the Colombian government initially called *Bandas Criminales*, *BACRIM [Criminal Gangs]* and are now called *Grupos Armados Organizados*, *GAO [Organized Armed Groups]*. Among them, we can mention Los Rastrojos,³ Los Paisas,⁴ Los Urabeños, the

¹ The ELN is far more regionally oriented, decentralized, and nonhierarchical in its decision-making than the FARC (Congressional Research Center 2019).

² "Colombia and war: A never-ending relationship", *Latin American Post*, 02/21/2019, <https://latinamericanpost.com/26527-colombia-and-war-a-never-ending-relationship>.

³ "Rastrojos", *Colombia Reports*, 04/01/2017, <https://colombiareports.com/rastrojos/>.

⁴ "The Paisas areas of influence", *Colombia Reports*, 02/15/2015, <https://colombiareports.com/paisas-areas-of-influence/>.

Gaitanista Self-Defense of Colombia (AGC) or Gulf Clan,⁵ and Caparrapos.⁶ Even the ELN is labeled as a GAO by the national government.⁷

2. Interaction of criminal groups with the peace-building process

To understand the way the peace agreement has changed the behavior of criminal groups, it is important to bear in mind the core issues addressed in the dialogue:

- 1. Comprehensive agricultural development policy:** This includes a rural reform that set the foundation for the transformation of rural areas, creating the socio-economic conditions to reduce the level of poverty and the reactivation of rural areas, as well as the development of peasant, family, and community agriculture.
- 2. Political participation:** Among other things, the inhabitants of the regions that are most affected by the conflict have the opportunity to choose temporary House Representatives in addition to the existing ones, in order to guarantee greater political inclusion of their communities. This section of the dialogue seeks to strengthen organizations and social movements so their voice is heard in public affairs.
- 3. End of the conflict:** This section establishes the terms by which confrontations with the FARC will be finalized through bilateral and definitive ceasefire, cessation of conflict, and the laying down of arms. The inclusion of the political party emerged from the transition of the FARC into legal political life, also including the economic and social reincorporation as well as the agreement on security guarantees and the fight against criminal organizations.
- 4. Solution to the problem of illicit drugs:** Promotes the voluntary substitution of illicit crops by transforming the territorial conditions of the affected areas and generating good socio-economic conditions for the communities living there. The goal is to end the relationship with armed conflict, the growing production and commercialization of illicit drugs, and the laundering of assets derived from this phenomenon—as well as the transformation of the countryside into a pole of legitimate development as an alternative to the temptation of growing illicit crops.

⁵ “The rise of the AGC, Colombia’s criminal powerhouse”, *Colombia Reports*, 03/19/2018, <https://colombiareports.com/the-rise-of-the-agc-colombias-criminal-powerhouse/>.

⁶ “Caparrapos”, *Colombia Reports*, 04/15/2019, <https://colombiareports.com/caparrapos/>.

⁷ It is pertinent to point out that certain FARC structures that did not embrace the peace process are classified as Residual Organized Armed Groups (GAOR). The GAOs were formed as a consequence of the refusal of former members of the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC) to demobilize and reintegrate into civilian life; these groups have a structure with the capacity to commit crimes at a national level. The need arose to classify dissident groups as Organized Residual Armed Groups (GAO), a category that allows the government security forces to attack them militarily without violating International Humanitarian Law. “Fuerzas Militares con luz verde para bombardear disidencias de FARC”, *El Espectador*, 10/31/2017, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/fuerzas-militares-con-luz-verde-para-bombardear-disidencias-de-farc-articulo-720736>.

5. **Agreement regarding the victims of the conflict:** The goal is to ensure that victims' rights are protected; that perpetrators are held accountable for what they did; to ensure the legal protections of those who participate; and contribute to achieving coexistence, reconciliation, non-repetition, and the transition from armed conflict to peace.
6. **Implementation and verification mechanisms:** This refers to a robust system that monitors and verifies compliance with implementation, including international verification.

Although it is expected that the implementation of the agreement will take approximately ten years to come to fruition, we can affirm that the signing of the peace agreement has had some degree of success in terms of peace. Valuable elements of the agreement include the end of an extensive conflict with the demobilization of guerrilla units, the holding of the most peaceful election in years,⁸ the handing over of weapons,⁹ the registration of the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force party as the political successor of the guerrilla group¹⁰ and advances in the reintegration of FARC fighters into regular society. However, there are certain complexities and challenges in the process that cannot be discounted.

As reported by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame (this institution was responsible for designing the methodology to identify advances in the implementation) only 23% of the State's implementation of agreement is in place, and 12% is expected to be fully implemented within the time specified by the agreement.¹¹

In this context, the first point related to rural reform, the second addressed political participation, and the fourth point referred to the solution to the problem of illicit drugs—all three have the lowest percentage of implementation. This implies that the state still does not manage nor provide public goods or services to the most excluded and abandoned rural territories. Similarly, farming families that live in remote areas where the State's institutions are weak continue to be pressured by illegal armed actors to control territories and sustain their illicit businesses (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2019).

In reference to the fourth point, it is also worth noting that, according to InSight Crime, "in 55% of the areas where the program started; there was an increase in murders by 33%. Several social leaders who bet on the substitution have been threatened or killed for their attempt to change the status quo. An aggravating factor for this situation is that, in some parts of the country, such as Guaviare, the pressure of the FARC's dissidence against the program has frightened some

⁸ "Colombia vivió las elecciones más seguras", *El País*, 05/27/2018, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/conflicto-y-narcotrafico/colombia-vivio-las-elecciones-mas-seguras-223160>.

⁹ "Colombia's Farc hand over a further 30% of weapons", *BBC*, 06/14/2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-40269080>.

¹⁰ "FARC rebels reborn as 'revolutionary force' party", *Al Jazeera*, 08/31/2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/farc-rebels-reborn-revolutionary-force-party-170831230246681.html>.

¹¹ Regarding the participation of international organizations, in 2016, at the request of the government of then-President Juan Manuel Santos, the UN Security Council created a mission in Colombia to follow up on the peace agreement with the FARC and verify its implementation. In September 2018, the Security Council extended the mandate of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia until 25 September 2019.

peasants who seek to benefit from the process.”¹² This is an alarming fact, considering that out of 1,122 municipalities, it is possible to grow coca in 819, which is 72.9% of all municipalities. Although, between 2015 and 2017, these crops were registered in only 205 municipalities, all 1,222 municipalities remain at risk as long as the implementation of measures related to comprehensive rural reform is not made effective (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018:104).

With respect to the third point regarding the end of conflict, the most imperative challenge is to guarantee security and protection of social leaders and human rights defenders.¹³ Another serious challenge is continuing to ensure security for former combatants and demobilized FARC members,¹⁴ as well as for communities at humanitarian risk due to the presence of illegal armed actors and criminal gangs.¹⁵

Other sources, such as Human Rights Watch, highlight that after having reduced the violence since the ceasefire of the FARC in 2015, the violence associated with the armed groups increased in 2018 (2018). This has led to greater human security threats to the civilian population due to the confrontation and reorganization of new armed groups. After the demobilization of the FARC in the departments of Meta, Guaviare, and Caquetá (a region historically dominated by this guerrilla), a decrease in violence was initially experienced. Presently, though, the regrouping of dissidents and other armed groups for territorial control of the areas formerly dominated by the FARC can be observed. Throughout the country, successor groups of the paramilitaries, ELN, Pelusos, Gulf Clan, dissidents of insurgencies and armed groups in general are estimated to be at 7,750,189, of which 2,500 are post-FARC men (Defensoría del Pueblo 2018).¹⁶ This context has deteriorated the security situation in departments such as Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, Guaviare, Putumayo, Córdoba, Valle del Cauca (particularly Buenaventura), Antioquia (Bajo Cauca and Urabá), Norte de Santander (Catatumbo)—not to mention the borders with Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama, as well as the Pacific coast.¹⁷

¹² “La respuesta integral del Estado para una Colombia sin FARC”, *InSight Crime*, 03/09/2018, <https://es.insightcrime.org/colombia-crimen-organizado/respuesta-integral-estado-colombia-sin-farc/>.

¹³ During the reporting period, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia (United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia 2019), 29 persons have reportedly been killed, including 4 women. Six of those cases have been verified so far. The Office has verified a total of 226 cases since the signing of the Peace Agreement. Many of those killed were members of local action boards, leaders of victims’ organizations, persons engaged in aspects of the peace agreement, such as the illicit crop substitution program, or individuals involved in land restitution claims. The departments of Antioquia, Cauca, and Norte de Santander were most affected. The majority of the attacks were committed by illegal armed groups and criminal organizations, and a lesser number can be attributed to common criminality.

¹⁴ Outside the territorial areas for training and reintegration, significant security challenges remain. During the reporting period, 12 former FARC-EP members were killed, including, for the first time, a participant in the reintegration program for children. The Mission has verified the killing of 99 former FARC-EP members since the signing of the Peace Agreement (United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia 2019).

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ From 27 December 2018 to 26 March 2019, the *Defensoría del Pueblo [Office of the Ombudsman]* issued 13 early warnings in which the risks to individuals and communities in 8 departments and 23 municipalities were outlined.

¹⁷ “Le cortaron la cabeza y le arrancaron el corazón: Defensor del Pueblo”, *El Espectador*, 12/11/2018, <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/territorio/le-cortaron-la-cabeza-y-le-arrancaron-el-corazon-defensor-del-pueblo-articulo-857473>.

Such is the degree of violence that, according to the statistics presented by UNHCR, during 2018, 118,200 new internal displacements were reported. Since 2015, Colombia has continued to report the largest number of internally displaced population, with 7,816,500 at the end of 2018 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2018).

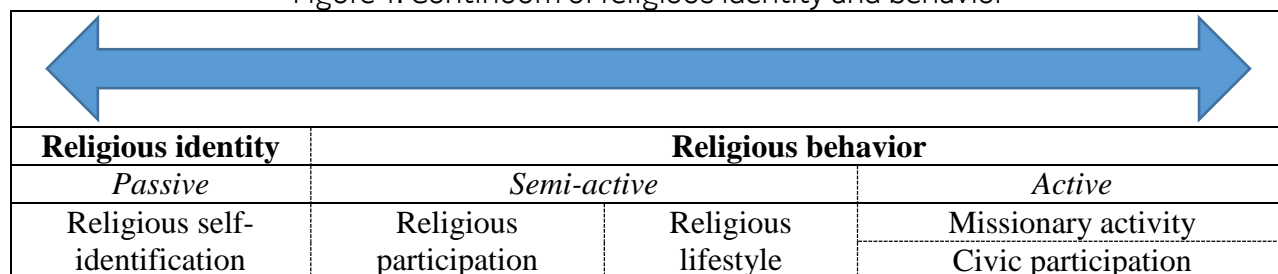
During the peace process, including its implementation, the increase in violence by newly-armed groups has led to assassinations and forced recruitment (including that of minors); limited access to education, water, and sanitation; and restrictions on movement and forced displacement of civilians. As we can see, these territories are the home base of the dispute between organized armed groups (such as criminal gangs, narco-traffickers, and dissident guerrilla groups) and the ELN. These groups seek to take control of illegal economies, starting with drug trafficking and maintaining a context of insecurity even after the signing of peace agreement.

3. Organized armed groups as a threat to religious minorities

Although we can affirm that the situation described above affects society in general, this section aims to explain the existence of certain groups with specific characteristics that must be recognized in order to make them visible and address the risks they are exposed to daily, especially in the areas co-opted by organized armed groups.

In order to identify them, it is necessary to differentiate the concepts of ‘religious identity’ and ‘religious behavior.’ The first corresponds to the condition of belonging to a religious group that follows a particular belief system, and the second refers to the notion that said system of beliefs (or religious convictions) lead their followers to behave in a particular way. This includes participation in religious events but also any form of behavior that is inspired by religious convictions, such as participation in civil society or politics (Petri 2019). This is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Continuum of religious identity and behavior



Source: Petri (2019).

Although many may identify themselves as followers of a particular religion, only a minority of them lead a lifestyle according to their beliefs. In the following, we will consider the religious people displaying semi-active and active behavior as a minority.

We understand vulnerability as a forward-looking feature, describing the potential to suffer human rights abuses, regardless of whether or not they actually occurred. It refers to both latent

and manifested human security threats. This is important from a psychological point of view: the threat (fear) of suffering human rights abuses may cause a lot of stress and anxiety, which is already a form of abuse. It also relates to UNDP's conceptualization of human security as a combination of "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear" (Petri 2019). In general, the concept of human security threats includes traditional security and integral development (United Nations Development Program 1994:23), therefore, threats to human security can exist at all levels of development; they may appear unexpectedly or they may be slowly taking root, according to the characteristics and challenges from each territory.

Taking this concept into consideration, we can affirm that as a result of the present security crisis of Colombia, its inhabitants are, in fact, in a vulnerable situation that increases the likelihood that they will experience human right abuses.

In some cases, active religious behavior has been identified as the primary cause of threats to human security, since individuals involved in organized crime see religious minorities who openly oppose their activities as a menace, especially when they are involved in social programs or politics. In Colombia, because of the slow implementation of the peace agreement and the government's lack of effectiveness assuring the protection of human rights, many religious groups became (and still are) *de facto* human rights defenders in indigenous, rural, and migrant communities. This was recognized in the *Plan de Acción Oportuna de Prevención y Protección para los Defensores de los Derechos Humanos, Líderes Sociales, Comunales y Periodistas [Plan of action for the prevention and protection of human rights defenders, social leaders and journalists]*, prepared by the Ministry of the Interior of Colombia, as it understood that a person can be a defender of human rights in different areas of leadership, including religious leaders (Ministerio del Interior, no date).

Religious leaders can be important allies in the construction of communities and societies, and their participation in movements in favor of social justice corresponds to a conviction that goes beyond personal interests. One of the most important things to take note of is that, because of their moral authority, these religious leaders enjoy strong popular legitimacy and deeply influence the attitudes and behaviors of the members in their communities. Sometimes, religious leaders are the only interlocutors between the people and the government, which is why their leadership is seen as a "relationship in competition" with the leaders of the criminal armed groups that try to control certain territories in the country.

According to the National Center of Historical Memory, during the armed conflict in Colombia, between 1982 and 2012, 589 cases of different forms of attacks of leaders and communities of faith were recorded. Some Catholic or Protestant church leaders, as well as their communities, have been violated in different ways as a result of their social commitment, and are also forms of reprisal for their non-violent resistance to the armed conflict. Shared characteristics among victimized leaders includes their religious commitment and their commitment to the rights of the most vulnerable populations in the country. Their opposition to violence often starts with communicating their convictions in a peaceful manner.¹⁸

¹⁸ This is one of the main characteristics of faith communities: non-violence and non-participation in the armed conflict are the preferred forms of resistance. Abuses against the civilian population are rejected, whether by illegal armed groups or by government security forces (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2018:14).

Additionally, organized crime not only competes with religion for its legitimacy and authority, but, also threatens the activities of religious groups for ‘commercial’ reasons.¹⁹ For example, many churches are targets of extortion because they are known to raise large sums of money from tithes and other contributions; the same happens with social activities promoted by associations or religious leaders that generate income.

Moreover, in the midst of the armed conflict, people who lead an active religious life and are part of social organizations dedicated to help the neediest—whether providing food, medicine, or education—have been forced to render assistance to members of armed groups, as well as being sanctioned for helping members of enemy groups in the area. This is illustrated by the following statement: “a certain group arrives in a town and asks for help—food, money, spies. They cannot be denied because they risk dying. A few days later, another armed group arrives, in struggle with the first. They know that in the village they have given aid to the first group, so they kill some people in retaliation and destroy houses.”²⁰

Even religious institutions or businesses, affiliated with social work activities linked with drug rehabilitation or social rehabilitation centers, run the risk of being vandalized or even “expropriated” by members of organized crime, the reason being that social work has influenced young people to avoid joining the ranks of illegitimate groups and also reduces the consumption of banned substances; both are situations that negatively impact criminal groups.

In the past, communities knew the “protection channels” to go through to solve these security problems, however, with the reordering and fragmentation of the armed groups, it is no longer known who is really in control, which authorities one can turn to, or what areas are a safer than others.

Given the special roles performed by religious minorities—human rights defenders, advocates of freedom and justice, promoters of denunciations of crimes or alliances between authorities and criminals—, criminal groups threaten and harass religious minorities relentlessly with the aim of achieving control of illicit businesses in the most neglected areas. Intimidation and submission through violent means are avenues they pursue to put a stop to religious activities, and gain social control over the population in territories disputed by the organized armed groups in the country, especially in the areas of Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, Guaviare, Putumayo, Córdoba, Valle del Cauca (particularly Buenaventura), Antioquia (Bajo Cauca and Urabá), Norte de Santander (Catatumbo), not to mention the border with Venezuela, Ecuador, or Panama.

¹⁹ Priest killed in Rio Negro, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3810>.

²⁰ “Colombia – Peace process collapsing, Christians suffering,” *Evangelical Focus*, 06/27/2019, http://evangelicalfocus.com/blogs/4557/Colombia_Peace_process_collapsing_Christians_suffering.

4. Violent incidents of persecution against religious minorities in Colombia (2017-2018)

The Violent Incident Database (VID) is a service of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, designed to collect, record, and analyze violent incidents related to violations of religious freedom. In order to demonstrate what was explained in the previous section, we will categorize, through cases reported in the VID, how people who actively profess a certain faith are more vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses.

Before presenting our data, it is necessary to take into account two aspects. First, although we have records of incidents since 2011 (as shown in Annex 1), we will only broadly describe the cases reported from 2017 and 2018, which correspond to the period following the signing of the peace agreement (Figure 2). Second, we chose to use case examples that involve mostly Christians, as we do not currently have information regarding threats to human security of other religious denominations. However, this does not imply that they cannot occur.

Figure 2. Violent persecution of Christians in Colombia

Colombia	2017	2018
Killings	2	7
(Attempts) to destroy Churches or Christian buildings	2	15
Closed Churches or Christian buildings	0	3
Arrests	0	5
Sentences	7	5
Abductions	0	0
Sexual Assaults	0	5
Forced Marriages	0	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	9	163
Attacked Christian houses	0	3
Attacked Christian shops or businesses	0	4
Forced to leave Home	18	91
Forced to leave Country	0	2

Source: Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2019). Violent Incidents Database, www.violentincidents.com.

More detail of the incidents reported can be found on the website of the Observatory. For the purpose of this section, we will organize the incidents according to broader categories, which will allow us to describe how Christians, Christian organizations, and Christian buildings or temples have been attacked as a means to censor and stop religious activities in the areas controlled by armed groups.

First of all, it is important to highlight how, after the signing of the peace agreement, especially in 2018, incidents of violence skyrocketed when compared to 2017. This coincides with what was stated in the first two sections regarding the violence exerted by those armed groups that, through violence, have sought to control the areas abandoned by the FARC because of the peace

agreement. Figure 3 provides an overview of the action of criminal groups against Christians, with some examples:

Figure 3. Empirical observation of the action of criminal groups against Christians

Categories	Examples
Religious observance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restrictions on church services: any type of large meeting is always at risk of being interrupted and/or attacked via extortion or kidnapping.²¹ Also, due to insecurity and violence, churches end up getting shut down.²² - Constant monitoring of individuals and religious services.
Missionary activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Catholic priests and pastors face intimidation and death threats for reporting details of criminal activities to local authorities,²³ and for their political messages.²⁴ They also have been beaten and robbed for their refusal to refrain from evangelizing in certain areas.²⁵ Sometimes, even the family of a Christian suffers the consequences of said threats and is forced to leave its home.²⁶ - Christians are also monitored and threatened due to supporting local authorities that look to eradicate criminal groups.²⁷
Places of Worship/Christian Property	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sometimes, criminal groups enter Christian temples violently and often threaten and/or attack nuns,²⁸ the priest or pastor in charge, and steal church property and alms.²⁹ - Priests are at risk of being killed for refusing to hand over church property to armed criminal groups.³⁰ - Temples and properties of members of religious groups are attacked and vandalized. At times basic services are interrupted.³¹

²¹ “Christians unable to congregate because of death threats”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3681>.

²² “Church closed by guerrilla groups”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3661>; “Parishioners prevented to enter to the church”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3666>.

²³ “A Roman Catholic priest continues his ministry despite death-threats from criminal gangs”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3399>.

²⁴ “Retired priest killed”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3654>.

²⁵ “Criminals threat with a gun to a priest”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3674>.

²⁶ “Children of Pastor fled the country”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3677>.

²⁷ “Christians supporting the government threatened”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3683>; “Christians vote under threat by guerrillas”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3692>.

²⁸ “Cali nuns are frightened by series of robberies in a monastery”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3646>.

²⁹ “Man robbed and attacked a priest inside a church”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3636>; “Illegal armed groups robbed a Church”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3658>.

³⁰ “Priest shot to death”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3485>.

Categories	Examples
<i>Laws or religious norms (also refers to not being forced to observe the laws or norms of another group)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals who actively practice their faith are frequently extorted and forced to cooperate with money laundering schemes. Illegal charges, extortion, and kidnapping in exchange for ransom is a form of intimidation meant to force Christians to abide by the rules of the criminal group.³²
<i>Social involvement/work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In general, pressure is applied to social and human rights initiatives. Religious leaders who participate or work in social initiatives are threatened and sometimes forced to leave the city because they fear for their lives.³³ Their property is also vandalized.³⁴ - Given that armed criminal groups target youths to indoctrinate and enlist them in their ranks, Christian leaders in charge of organizations that aim to help and educate children have been attacked as a way to intimidate them and deter them from continuing with their cause.³⁵

Source: own elaboration.

5. Persecution against Christian women

In the period under analysis, only one case of a Christian girl sexually harassed by members of armed groups was reported.³⁶ However, given the dynamics of violence in the country, we believe that there are incidents that have gone unreported either because of fear of reprisal or because the attacks against women are counted as part of statistics about gender, and not necessarily for their affiliation or religious behavior.

Internal sources have pointed out that Christian families, especially Christian leaders, are intimidated by threats to their daughters. Criminal groups are known to force them to allow their daughters to get involved in a (sexual) relationship with them or to join the criminal gang. Parents have to accept the circumstances under threat of death and as a result, girls and adolescents frequently end up becoming victims of physical, psychological, and sexual exploitation, forced labor, etc. Some of them have been even forced to terminate their pregnancies.³⁷

³¹ “Light cut in churches”, *Violent Incidents Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3665>.

³² “Catholic priest transferred due to threats”, *Violent Incident Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3799>.

³³ “Priest threatened with death”, *Violent Incident Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3678>.

³⁴ “Vehicle of a Priest, vandalized”, *Violent Incident Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3712>.

³⁵ “Pastor leading a children’s foundation threatened”, *Violent Incident Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3671>.

³⁶ “Christian girl sexually harassed by criminal groups”, *Violent Incident Database*, <http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3697>.

³⁷ “Colombia investigates forced abortions for female fighters in rebel ranks”, *The Guardian*, 12/11/2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/11/colombia-investigates-forced-abortions-farc-female-fighters-in-rebel-ranks>.

In general, the situation of women in the country represents a challenge since inequality is still very much prevalent. Although the final peace agreement includes a section on gender in order to meet the particular needs of women involved in the conflict, according to the last report of the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, female leaders and human rights defenders still face increasing threats and attacks, including sexual violence (United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia 2019). In this context, the situation of female Christian leaders can worsen as long as their activism against criminal groups represents a threat to them. Despite the signing of the peace agreement, and as a result of the violence perpetrated by armed groups, Colombian women suffer an additional burden to violence—they struggle with less access to health, sanitary, food and other resources needed to ensure their survival and that of their children.

According to the Single Victim Registry, as of June 1, 2019, 4,234,086 women and 4,226,317 men are considered victims of armed conflict (Red Nacional de Información 2019). However, it is said that “men are the owners of the war and women and children the principal victims” because usually the zones of violence tend to be the most neglected by the State—that is, they are the zones with the lowest degree of development and social welfare, which implies a higher rate of illiteracy and poverty. In these contexts, women are usually considered inferior to men.

We have no information about actions targeting women specifically and solely for their Christian beliefs; however, there is no doubt that in the current security context, Christian women possess a specific vulnerability to be abused. Some behaviors, especially linked with their sexuality, contradict their religious beliefs and are reasons why they are twice as likely to be victimized. They often are forced to have sex before marriage, to use contraceptives, and if not, they are forced to abort. Considering that the criminal groups are the *de facto* authorities in some areas, there is no viable means for women immersed in this environment of subjugation to assert their rights or stop the continuum of violence to which they are exposed.

6. Conclusion

Although the signing of the peace agreement can be considered as a milestone in the history of Colombia, it is also true that its implementation has resulted in counterattacks on the part of its critics, both at the political level and in the demobilized areas. Thus, even when security has improved in some regions affected by the conflict, in others it has permitted armed groups to fill the void created by the withdrawal of the FARC, which jeopardizes the success of the implementation of the peace agreement.

In this context, we believe that, following the definitions and considerations developed throughout this report, we have demonstrated the specific vulnerability of religious minorities in the country as a result of the post-FARC security crisis. Although we have presented examples associated with Christian religious minorities, this does not imply that other religious denominations cannot suffer from the same situations of risk if their activities represent a threat to criminal groups.

We have focused on describing how the illicit activities of armed groups affected those who lead an active life according to their faith; nonetheless, we must point out that other factors allow or even aggravate the context of vulnerability. The role played by the authorities is an important element, and in this respect it is worth saying that they positively or negatively influence the way religious minorities live their faith. Thus, corrupt authorities colluding with drug trafficking networks and armed groups place victims in a more susceptible position. Furthermore, authorities who do not identify (or refuse to recognize) the characteristics and dangers of these groups, impede the implementation of the pertinent preventive and security measures needed to guarantee their human security.

References

- Alto Comisionado para la Paz. (2016). *Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera*. Retrieved from <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Documentos%20compartidos/24-11-2016NuevoAcuerdoFinal.pdf>.
- Asociación Paz y Esperanza, Perú & Asociación Cristiana Menonita para Justicia, Paz y Acción Noviolenta (JUSTAPAZ), Colombia. (2017). *Las Buenas Nuevas en Contextos de Violencia: La Experiencia de Colombia y Perú*. Retrieved from <http://institutopaz.net/sistema/data/files/buenas-nuevas-en-contextos-de-violencia.pdf>.
- Baker, B. (2018). The Persistence of the FARC in Colombia. *E-International Relations Students*. Retrieved from: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/08/07/the-persistence-of-the-farc-in-colombia/>.
- Centro de Memoria Histórica. (2018). *Memoria y Comunidades de Fe en Colombia*. Retrieved from <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/informes-2019/memoria-y-comunidades-de-fe-en-colombia>.
- Congressional Research Center. (2019). *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43813.pdf>.
- Defensoría del Pueblo. (2018). ALERTA TEMPRANA N° 011-18. Retrieved from <http://www.defensoria.gov.co/attachment/1788/AT%20N%C2%B020011-18%20ANT-Vigi%CC%81a%20del%20Fuerte%20y%20CHO-Bojaya%CC%81%20-%20Medio%20Atrato.pdf>.
- Human Rights Watch. (2018). *World Report 2019, Colombia*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/es/world-report/2019/country-chapters/326041>.
- InSight Crime & Universidad del Rosario. (2019). Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime. Retrieved from <https://es.insightcrime.org/indepth/observatorio-rosario/>.
- Interviews with representatives of faith-based charities working in Colombia.
- Jackson, O. (2018). *COLOMBIA: Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women under pressure for their faith*. Harderwijk: Open Doors International – World Watch Research Unit. Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/COLOMBIA-Compound-structural-vulnerabilities-facing-Christian-women-2018-FINAL-WITH-PREFACE.pdf>.
- Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. (2019). *ACTUALIZACIÓN. Informe 3 del Instituto Kroc. Hacia una paz de calidad en Colombia*. Retrieved from https://kroc.nd.edu/assets/315919/190408_actualizacio_n_informe_3_instituto_kroc_feb19.pdf.

- Ministry of the Interior of Colombia. (no date). *Plan de Acción Oportuna de Prevención y Protección para los Defensores de los Derechos Humanos, Líderes Sociales, Comunales y Periodistas*. Retrieved from https://www.mininterior.gov.co/sites/default/files/plan_de_accion_oportuna_de_prevencion_y_proteccion_0.pdf.
- Petri, D.P. (2019, forthcoming). *The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities*. Doctoral thesis at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
- Pino Montoya, J.W. (2014). Las FARC-EP: de movimiento social a grupo armado. *Katharsis 17*: 147-157.
- Ramirez, R. (2018). *Latin America: Organized corruption and crime – Implications for Christians*. Harderwijk: Open Doors International – World Watch Research Unit. Retrieved from <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Latin-America-Organized-corruption-and-crime-2018.pdf>.
- Red Nacional de Información. (2019). Reporte General de Victimizaciones al 1 de junio de 2019. Retrieved from <https://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Home/Genero?vvg=1>.
- United Nations Development Program. (1994). *Human Development Report*. Retrieved from http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2018). *Global trends. Forced Displacement in 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2018). *Colombia, Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos*. Retrieved from https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia_Monitoreo_territorios_afectados_cultivos_ilicitos_2017_Resumen.pdf.
- United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. (2019). *Report of the Secretary-General*. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1908072.pdf>.
- World Watch Research Unit. (2019). *Colombia: Country Dossier*. Harderwijk: Open Doors International – World Watch Research Unit. Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Colombia-WWR-COUNTRY-DOSSIER-March-2019-update.pdf>.

Annex 1: Violent incidents of persecution against Christians in Colombia (2011-2018)

Colombia	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Killings	0	1	11	7	0	2	2	7
(Attempts) to destroy Churches or Christian buildings	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	15
Closed Churches or Christian buildings	0	2	151	11	0	0	0	3
Arrests	0	0	12	1	3	0	0	5
Sentences	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	5
Abductions	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
Sexual Assaults	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Forced Marriages	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	1	39	545	206	12	3	9	163
Attacked Christian houses	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Attacked Christian shops or businesses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Forced to leave Home	0	0	34	173	119	1	18	91
Forced to leave Country	0	38	6	0	0	0	0	2

Source: Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2019). Violent Incidents Database, www.violentincidents.com.