

# Colombia: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS UNDER THREAT

*International campaign for the right to defend human rights*



## Declaration

*“Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.”*

Article 1, United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders,  
December 1998.

Those who defend human rights and the rule of law in Colombia have always been victims of systematic stigmatisation, threats, sexual violence, unfounded criminal proceedings, violent attacks and killings carried out by all actors in the conflict: state security forces, paramilitaries and guerrillas. Colombia continues to register some of the highest levels of attacks against human rights defenders in the world.

**However, the situation has now reached a new level of crisis.** In April 2009, documents were made public which show the existence of a massive illegal espionage operation carried out by Colombia’s intelligence agency, the Administrative Security Department (DAS), which reports directly to the President, against those who promote and defend human rights, whose objective, according to those responsible, was to “restrict or neutralize their work”.

The DAS has not only been intercepting human rights defenders’ private telephone calls illegally, it has also been following defenders and taking photographs of them and their families. Police units and the National Army also use intelligence operations to restrict the work of defenders. This “strategic intelligence” contravenes democratic principles and constitutes an attack on human rights in Colombia.

This is only the most recent of a long list of unacceptable practices, including the ‘para-politics’ scandal (the infiltration by paramilitary groups of the Colombian congress), extrajudicial executions, and attacks against the Supreme Court, all of which call into question whether the political will exists to guarantee the rule of law and respect for the fundamental rights for all Colombians. It is important to note that all of these scandals were exposed by the advocacy of human rights defenders working for truth, justice and peace.

**Who are human rights defenders?**

A human rights defender is anybody who, individually or with others, professionally or voluntarily, non-violently promotes or protects human rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural). Trade union leaders, journalists, academics, teachers, artists, church personnel and clergy, lawyers, judges, members of non-governmental organisations and social movement, leaders of indigenous and afro-descendent communities, women’s and LGBT\* rights activists – all are human rights defenders.

**What does it mean to defend human rights?**

Defending human rights is a moral and humanist responsibility aimed at saving lives, preventing grave human rights violations and ensuring that violence does not remain in impunity. Defenders seek to strengthen the rule of law and call for changes in government and state policies.

Human rights defenders should be free to condemn human rights violations, to express themselves freely, to carry out their investigative and legal work, to defend victims of violence, to protect the civilian population, to demand respect for International Humanitarian Law, and to promote peace.

Now is the time for us to take action for the ***Right to Defend Human Rights in Colombia***. To this end, this campaign seeks to achieve concrete changes for defenders in the following areas:

***1. End impunity for violations against human rights defenders***

The only substantial way to end threats, harassment and killings of human rights defenders is to carry out impartial investigations to identify the perpetrators, including the intellectual authors, and to prosecute them, thus sending a clear signal that violence and persecution will be punished.

***2. End the misuse of state intelligence***

Defamatory and false information about human right defenders is being held in civil, police and military intelligence files. This information is used to persecute, threaten and

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\* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people

delegitimize human rights defenders. It is also used to underpin unfounded criminal investigations of defenders and, sometimes, to assassinate them.

**3. *End systematic stigmatisation***

Public statements by high-ranking government officials, including the President of Colombia, aim to discredit the legitimate work of human rights defenders and suggest links between defenders and guerrilla groups, putting defenders at even greater risk.

**4. *End unfounded criminal proceedings***

In Colombia a new form of persecution is emerging: unfounded criminal proceedings. These proceedings are usually based on false witness testimony, manipulated evidence and unsubstantiated intelligence reports and frequently lead to the unlawful privation of defenders' liberty.

**5. *Structurally improve the protection programmes for people at risk***

It is important that the Colombian state offers protection programmes. However, those that exist have proven insufficient and in some instances have been used to obtain information that is later used against the very people supposedly being protected. They require significant restructuring in consultation with their beneficiaries.

We unequivocally reject all those practices which violate the human dignity of human rights defenders. We call on all armed actors (state security forces, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups) to respect their legal obligations. We insist on the need for human rights to be respected and upheld by the State, because this is the only way to build a just, peaceful and democratic Colombia.

**IN COLOMBIA HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IS UNDER THREAT:  
HELP US DEFEND IT.**