Where is Colombia’s Peace? – Race and Equality responds to the massacre of five young Afro-Colombian conflict victims

A crime that reveals the need for truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition

Bogota, August 13, 2020.- On Tuesday, August 11, 2020, five young Afro-Colombians were murdered near their homes in the Llano Verde neighborhood of Cali. The five victims (Jean Paul Perlaza, 15; Leyder Cárdenas Hurtado, 15; Juan Manuel Montaño, 15; Álvaro José Caicedo Silva, 15; and Jair Andrés Cortez Castro, 14) were all members of families that had been previously victimized by Colombia’s armed conflict. The victims left their homes for a community activity; their bodies were discovered in a nearby sugarcane field at the end of the day with signs of torture and execution-style bullet wounds.

The International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights (Race and Equality) expresses our solidarity with the victims’ families, the Llano Verde community, and the Cali member organizations of AFRODES (National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians). We stand with the community in demanding that this crime not fall into impunity and that the government take the necessary steps to prevent such crimes.

Reports of the crime in local media, information on social media, and statements by local and national authorities have not yet offered a clear picture of the facts, nor do they provide the necessary context to understand the background and impacts of the murder. Both of these gaps must be filled in order for Colombian authorities to bring justice to this case and end the systematic slaughter of young Afro-Colombians.

This massacre is part of a pattern emerging from the rampant structural racism in Colombia. This racism has generated violence that displaced Afro-Colombians from their ancestral territories and continues to plague them in urban areas where displaced persons have settled. In Llano Verde, Afro-Colombians have been victimized by further incidents of displacement, threats, attacks, murders and assassinations, forced recruitment by illegal groups including drug traffickers, sexual exploitation, and a lack of educational and work opportunities. These forms of violence have affected vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, and social leaders. Such violence also affects Afro-descendant communities in places such as Buenaventura, Bogotá, and Soacha. Afro-Colombian organizations have consistently denounced the murders of young people in Llano Verde for years; sadly, such violence has only increased.

1 AFRODES statement: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ge60tL3Abf5emndvTOvypRe2nk8l9PjH/view
In Llano Verde, populated mostly by families that left rural areas due to the Armed Conflict, Afro-Colombians have formed new communities to maintain their traditions, ways of life, and cultural identity. These efforts have not been met with support from the Colombian government; on the contrary, Cali’s housing policy has failed to take into account the particular situation of displaced conflict victims. In some cases, conflict victims live side-by-side with former members of armed groups, a tense and harmful situation that is not addressed by any sort of reconciliation program.

The Colombian government’s overall failure to invest in peace has allowed violence and crime, particularly the drug trade, to take root in Llano Verde and other communities made up of those who sought to flee such violence. Llano Verde has become another battleground, with young Afro-Colombians caught in the crossfire.

The member organizations of AFRODES in Cali have spent years carrying out grassroots work to improve living conditions for Afro-Colombians in communities like Llano Verde. They have documented human rights violations, conducted advocacy, and demanded that the government fulfill its obligations under Colombian and international law to restore, protect, and fulfill the rights of Afro-Colombians. Race and Equality has accompanied them in their work, particularly their advocacy at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). AFORDES discussed their work during an IACHR thematic hearing in 2018 and took part in the visit to Colombia by IACHR Commissioners Margarete May Macaulay and Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño. We have also accompanied AFRODES Vice President Erlendy Cuero Bravo in her request for precautionary measures, a legal process which compelled the Colombian government to protect her from harm. Erlendy requested these measures when, in retaliation for her work defending the human rights of Afro-Colombians, she was forced to flee Llano Verde by violent attacks. AFRODES leaders in Cali and nationwide have received similar threats.

The killing of Jean Paul Perlaza, Leyder Cárdenas Hurtado, Juan Manuel Montaño, Álvaro José Caicedo Silva, and Jair Andrés Cortez Castro demands a response from both the local and national government, beginning with the recognition of the structural and systematic violence underlying the crime. We welcome the local government’s efforts to determine the facts, investigate the crime, and sanction those responsible; we also insist that these efforts reach all the way to the intellectual authors of the murder. The government must also acknowledge the illegal armed groups active in Llano Verde and formulate a response to their presence. Race and Equality will continue to accompany AFRODES Cali, especially in advocating to prevent impunity in these murders.
The following recommendations, developed alongside AFRODES Cali, are crucial to a full response to this tragic incident:

- The offices of the Prosecutor, Police, and Criminal Investigator must carry out investigations that recognize and take into account the Afro-Colombian identity of the victims and their particular experiences as Afro-Colombians.
- The national office for armed conflict victims (Unidad de Víctimas) and the national office for social protection (Unidad de Protección) must adopt the necessary measures to care for and protect the victims’ families, communities, and community organizations.
- The city government of Cali and departmental government of Valle must begin to comply with laws, court orders, and public policies calling for targeted efforts to protect Afro-Colombian youth who were victimized by the armed conflict.
- The System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-repetition must prioritize projects to analyze the ongoing victimization of displaced Afro-Colombians in Colombian cities.
- We request that the IACHR take part in the efforts to investigate the killing, monitor the case, and follow up on its recommendations to the State of Colombia generated by the thematic hearing involving AFRODES and the in-country visit to Colombia.
- We request that the United Nations human rights Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures, especially the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, examine the Colombian government’s response to the killing.