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Idoia Villanueva Ruiz
European Parliament
Bât. Willy Brandt
60, rue Wiertz / Wiertzstraat 60
B-1047 Brussels

Ibán García del Blanco
Parlement Européen
Bât. Altiero Spinelli
60, rue Wiertz / Wiertzstraat 60
B-1047 Bruxelles/Brussels

Iván Duque, President of the Republic of Colombia

Cra. 8 ## 7 - 26, Bogotá, Cundinamarca, Colombia

contacto@presidencia.gov.co

Dear President Iván Duque,

Like the European Union, Colombia is confronting the challenges of the Covid19 pandemic. Given the existing relationship of cooperation between the EU and Colombia, we have been closely following the situation of human rights and peace in the country.

In light of this situation, we would like to add our voices to the numerous and explicit messages of concern raised by relevant Colombian personalities from different political groups. We would like to express our most serious concerns about recent news related to the existence of intelligence files, which reportedly appear to be the result of illegal surveillance activities, carried out by the Colombian National Army, against at least 130 people.

These people include journalists, researchers, lawyers and human rights defenders, including for example members of the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR), as well as high court judges, members of your government and deputies from opposition political parties. We are also concerned that other human rights organisations like the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission report the existence of other databases, which include information about other people, obtained via illegal military intelligence activities.

We are seriously concerned about what these events reveal about defence policy and military doctrines within the Colombian Armed Forces, especially when viewed alongside other events which took place in 2019 (such as the existence of military directives putting the civilian population at risk of becoming the victims of extrajudicial killings or the armed conflict). In our opinion, these activities seriously affect constitutional and democratic order in the country and even more so in a context of significant militarisation in regions of the country, amid a global pandemic. Indeed, we would like to echo the statement from the Colombian Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which has highlighted that intelligence, should be used to protect human rights and not to violate them. We also trust, Mr President, that as the highest Commander of the State Security Forces, you will take all the necessary action to clarify this regrettable situation, bring those most responsible for these crimes to justice and guarantee that these events will not happen again.

On the other hand, we are also aware of the situation for human rights defenders. According to the We Are Defenders Program, between January and March 2020, 62 defenders were killed, and they have also highlighted the increase in risks to defenders and their families due to the quarantine measures. While these measures are without a doubt necessary, they also mean that defenders can be more easily located by perpetrators of attacks against them. We have received reports of attacks and even of two massacres carried out against the families of social leaders in the Cauca department. In light of this situation, we are concerned about reports from human rights organisations regarding the insufficient response by the State, including in some cases a reduction in State protection measures. We consider that statements such as those made by the Minister of the Interior, comparing the killing of defenders to the theft of mobile phones, cast aspersions on the government's intentions to do everything within its means to prevent further killings.

Finally, we understand that the situation of armed conflict persists in regions of Colombia causing forced displacement, selective killings, massacres, alleged extrajudicial killings and sexual violence. It is worrying that communities in areas like Chocó, the Pacific Coast, Cauca, Bajo Cauca, Sur de Córdoba and Catatumbo, are facing the effects of armed violence as well as the effects of Covid19. Indeed, we welcome the ceasefire announced by the National Liberation Army as an important step in scaling down the violence in the country and making progress towards a peacebuilding scenario. Within this situation, we consider it necessary that additional measures be taken to stop the violence caused by armed confrontation with and between armed groups. In particular, the measures established in the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Farc-EP must be implemented, regarding the dismantling of paramilitary successor groups, to guarantee the protection of small-scale farming communities, Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities, in the areas most affected by the conflict, as well as human rights defenders, social leaders and former Farc-Ep combatants. Indeed, we believe that urgent measures must be taken to stop the number of killings of former Farc-EP combatants from increasing any further than the 190 who have already been killed since the signing of the Peace Agreement.

We see the implementation of the Peace Agreement as a priority in our relationship with Colombia, and because of this, we were surprised by statements made by some local governors and individuals in the current governing party, calling for resources for the implementation of the Peace Agreement to be re-allocated to measures against Covid19. In the European Parliament, we are concerned that funds, which should be for Peace, are being used for other ends.

In peacebuilding, democratic space and guarantees for the work of human rights defenders and of social and political leaders, is necessary now more than ever. For this reason, the MEPs who have signed this letter would like to express our solidarity with the Colombian people in this moment of global uncertainty. We ask the Colombian government to ensure that all of its measures against the pandemic and its subsequent actions are carried out with total respect for human rights and its international commitments to human rights and peacebuilding.

Yours sincerely,

Idoia Villanueva Ruiz. MEP GUE/NGL

Javier López. MEP S&D

Ibán García del Blanco. MEP S&D

Alexis Georgoulis. MEP GUE/NGL

Inmaculada Rodríguez Piñero. S&D

Izaskun Bilbao Barandika. MEP Renew

M^a Eugenia Rodríguez Palop. MEP GUE/NGL

Isabel Santos. MEP S&D

Leila Chaibi MEP GUE/NGL

Pernando Barrena. MEP GUE/NGL

Manuel Bompard MEP GUE/NGL

Helmut Scholz. MEP GUE/NGL

Miguel Urbán Crespo. MEP GUE/NGL

Sira Rego. MEP GUE/NGL

Manu Pineda. MEP GUE/NGL

Fabio Massimo Castaldo, MEP M5S

Adriana Maldonado López. MEP S&D

José Gusmão. MEP GUE/NGL

Marisa Matías. MEP GUE/NGL

Alviina Alametsä. MEP Greens/EFA

Erik Marquardt, MEP Greens/EFA

Diana Riba i Giner. MEP Greens/EFA

Dimitrios Papadimoulis. MEP GUE/NGL

Massimiliano Smeriglio. MEP S&D

Maria Arena. MEP S&D

Nikolaj Villumsen. MEP GUE/NGL

Maria-Manuel Leitão-Marques. MEP S&D

Ernes Urtasun, MEP Greens/EFA