

20,000 victims of enforced disappearance in Colombia

Enforced disappearance persists, fuelled by impunity

Brussels, August 30, 2013. Today marks the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. And tragically, in Colombia this unfortunate practice that has characterized Latin America for decades before the eyes of the international community persists.

According to figures from the National Institute of Legal Medicine, on August 31, 2012, the cumulative figure for the total number of missing persons in Colombia was 74,361, of which 18,638 are victims of enforced disappearance. According to the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation, by May 2013, a total of 81,000 people had been reported missing, of which 20,000 are cases of enforced disappearance. Carlos Valdes, the director of the Institute of Legal Medicine, has stated that the most worrying aspect of this crime is that it is massively underreported ([El Tiempo](#)).

Enforced disappearance in Colombia has reached the same magnitude as during dictatorships in neighbouring countries: some 30,000 people were forcibly disappeared in Argentina, mainly during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship; while some 3,065 people were killed or disappeared during the Chilean dictatorship, between September 1973 and March 1990.

In its November 2012 report, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) determined that “*there is reasonable basis*” to believe that the Colombian State is responsible for enforced disappearances, and therefore, for committing crimes against humanity.

The “*disturbing*” impunity surrounding these crimes, in the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), encourages their repetition. Impunity also perpetuates the pain of relatives who still do not know what happened to their loved ones or where their remains are. In addition, family members and those seeking justice for these crimes often themselves become targets of threats and attacks, as shown by the attempted forced disappearance of Sofia López, a lawyer from the Corporation for Justice and Dignity (*Corporación Justicia y Dignidad*), on April 19, 2013.

During the Universal Periodic Review of Colombia before the UN Human Rights Council, held in April this year, several States mentioned their concern at the high levels of cases of enforced disappearance. Unfortunately, Colombia rejected the recommendation calling for it to accept the competence of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, which would allow the victims to denounce cases before the Committee, by stating that it is already providing sufficient protection measures.

However, with the recent reform of military criminal jurisdiction and the adoption of the Legal Framework for Peace, Colombia could provide even more guarantees of impunity for the perpetrators of a crime that is considered one of the most serious.

Oidhaco therefore reiterates its call to the European Union, its Member States and the international community, to demand as part of their diplomatic labours, that Colombia takes concrete measures to fight impunity for this crime, and provides the necessary protection to persons and organisations that denounce cases of enforced disappearance and struggle to eradicate this crime in Colombia.

What is enforced disappearance? It is defined as the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person.

The International Office on Human Rights - Action Colombia, represents a network of more than 30 European organisations. From its headquarters in Brussels, Oidhaco accompanies Colombian civil society initiatives which work towards the full respect of human rights and international humanitarian law, and a negotiated solution to the internal armed conflict. Since 2012, Oidhaco has been granted Special Consultative Status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council.