

Brussels, 14 April 2021

International organisations express concern about the security situation in the city of Buenaventura and demand guarantees for civilians

The signatory organisations¹ express our concern about the security situation in the city of Buenaventura, particularly recent events against the community in the Santa Fe district of the city. This district is next to the port and logistics terminal of TCBuen, whose parent company is headquartered in Europe². These incidents are taking place in a context of structural violence and amid the worsening humanitarian situation in the port city.

Our organisations have been informed of harassment and serious acts of violence against the inhabitants of the Santa Fe neighbourhood, located in the 5th district of the city of Buenaventura. In March of this year alone, armed actors have fired repeatedly and indiscriminately at homes in this area, with at least three incidents in which armed men travelling on motorcycles and in high-end vehicles, have fired at homes, as happened on 13 and 14 March. In the latter incident, a girl was injured when she was hit by shards resulting from the shooting. In an incident on 19 March, three grenades were launched in addition to the shooting, but did not detonate. The next day, a police operation removed the grenades, and, on the same day, gunmen threatened young women in this neighbourhood, accusing them of being informants, and telling them to leave if they did not want to be killed.

Despite phone calls alerting the authorities, the police are not known to act quickly or effectively when residents report the presence of these armed groups. The same goes for the police officers who constantly guard TCBuen's facilities at the edge of the Santa Fe neighbourhood.

What is more, so far this year, there have been reports of the destruction of three homes in this same neighbourhood, caused by a fire whose origin has not yet been clarified. It should be noted that since 2013 there have been several fires in this neighbourhood that have destroyed a total of 32 homes and left at least 160 people affected. The origin of these fires has also not been investigated by the authorities, although suspicious vehicles have been reported in the area on several occasions in the days before the incidents occurred.

Since 2013, organisations and communities in Buenaventura have reported impact and damage caused by the operations and actions of the company TCBuen, especially in the neighbourhoods of the city that border the port terminal. There have been reports of attacks against physical and emotional integrity, the violation of labour rights, the violation of access to land, and the violation of the right of free, prior and informed consultation, as well as socio-cultural impacts, environmental impacts and impacts on the local economy.

¹ The International Office for Human Rights Action on Colombia Oidhaco. La Taula Catalana por la Paz y los Derechos Humanos en Colombia, a network of 31 organizations and platforms in Catalonia. And Misereor IHR Hilfswerk.

² The parent company of TCBuen is APM Terminals based in The Hague, Netherlands. APM Terminals is in turn a subsidiary of Maersk based in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The international community has also raised concerns about the situation. An international delegation composed of representatives of civil society organisations and Catalan institutions, visited Buenaventura in 2016 and reported that “investment (...) has been carried out in an environment of serious human rights violations, violence and expulsion against the black communities that have ancestrally inhabited the territories occupied by TC Buen”³.

In the first months of 2021, the security situation of the city of Buenaventura has worsened alarmingly, due to the presence of illegal armed actors fighting over territorial control, amid the lack of comprehensive protection measures from the State for civilians⁴. There has also been systematic forced recruitment of minors by illegal armed groups⁵. Between 1 January and 19 March 2021, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Colombia reported the murder of 41 people, 13 enforced disappearances and the mass displacement of more than 8,000 people, and the OHCHR Representative has urged the authorities to strengthen spaces for dialogue to meet the demands of the population, to accelerate social investment and to take concerted action between the national, departmental and local government to dismantle criminal networks operating in the area on a permanent basis⁶.

These impacts aggravate the situation of structural poverty for civilians, in this region which already has one of the highest rates of poverty in the country and a serious lack of guarantees for the enjoyment of human rights.

We therefore call on the international community to urge the Colombian Government to:

- Immediately implement collective and effective protection measures that guarantee the physical and psychological life and integrity of the inhabitants and leaders from the Santa Fe neighbourhood and in general from Buenaventura’s social organisations and leaders. These measures should be agreed with the same community and organisations and comply with international standards of protection.
- Investigate quickly and effectively the harassment and violent acts that have occurred against this community and bring to justice those responsible for planning and carrying out these crimes.
- Urgently resume the process of implementing the agreements reached with the Government after the 2016 Civic Strike, with the continued participation of the Strike Committee. The implementation of these agreements, which ensured full satisfaction of the economic, social and cultural rights of the inhabitants of the municipality of Buenaventura, is vital for overcoming the humanitarian and human rights crisis.
- Urgently and comprehensively implement all the prevention and security measures in the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP and develop a specific plan to dismantle illegal armed structures in the municipality of Buenaventura with the participation of civil society.

³ <https://www.taulacolombia.org/es/informe-de-la-visita-de-la-delegacion-catalana-a-buenaventura/>

⁴ <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2021/04/05/indepaz-alerta-por-el-aumento-de-desplazamientos-masivos-en-lo-que-va-de-2021/>.

⁵ <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/territorio/buenaventura-entre-el-confinamiento-y-el-reclutamiento-forzado/>

⁶ <https://nacionesunidas.org.co/noticias/comunicados-de-prensa/oficina-de-la-onu-para-los-derechos-humanos-urge-articulacion-entre-autoridades-y-acelerar-la-implementacion-de-los-acuerdos-del-paro-civico-y-el-acuerdo-de-paz-para-atender-imperiosa-situacion-de-vi/>