

Brussels, 23 April 2024

Subject: Welcoming the appointment of the new European Union Special Envoy for Peace in Colombia

The International Office for Human Rights Action Colombia (OIDHACO), a network of 42 European organisations working for peace and respect for human rights in Colombia, welcomes the appointment of Mr. Adrianus Koetsenruijter as the new European Union Special Envoy for Peace in Colombia.

We hope that Mr Koetsenruijter, like his predecessor Mr Gilmore, will continue to be a fundamental supporter of the European Union in the 2016 peace process and the negotiations taking place in Colombia within the framework of the "Total Peace" policy being developed by the current government.

The Colombian government has strongly expressed its willingness to respect the 2016 Final Peace Agreement (AFP) with the now defunct FARC-EP, as a fundamental part of the Total Peace policy, which will be sanctioned in 2023. However, despite these advances in dialogue and ceasefire agreements, violence continues to plague the rural population in large parts of the country. Disputes over different territories and/or illegal economies, the continuation of armed confrontations between illegal groups, and delays in the territorial implementation of the final peace agreement continue to cause violations of rights and disastrous humanitarian consequences for the civilian population.

The policy of total peace has also made it possible to reach out to the various armed groups and criminal organisations in the country. This policy has put the possibility of bilateral ceasefires on the table. However, difficulties such as the lack of adequate verification protocols or mechanisms, as well as non-compliance on the part of the illegal actors, have meant that so far these ceasefires are only in force with the ELN and the Estado Mayor Central armed group. These political negotiations have made progress, such as the creation and installation of the National Participation Committee in August 2023, so that Colombian society can participate in these dialogues. Urban peace talks with criminal gangs in Quibdó, Valle de Aburrá and Buenaventura have led to a significant reduction in violence in these cities thanks to truces between criminal gangsⁱⁱⁱ. On the other hand, there is uncertainty about the progress of these talks due to the lack of a legal framework and the Constitutional Court's order to Congress to regulate the prosecution of these gangs^{iv}.

In view of the above, we are convinced that the achievement of peace objectives in Colombia will continue to depend to a large extent on international support, in particular from the European Union. The EU's political and financial support has been crucial to the progress of peace in Colombia. EU countries have contributed to the Multi-Donor Fund and the European Trust Fund for Peace in Colombia (EUTF). At the moment, however, there is concern among civil society organisations about the disappearance of the Trust Fund and the failure to define a new funding mechanism for peace support, which risks creating a vacuum in the peace efforts of the Colombian people.

We also hope that the new European Union Special Envoy for Peace in Colombia will continue to pay close attention to gender and ethnicity issues, which civil society has been calling for many years.

We hope that his mandate will be strengthened and that humanitarian assistance and respect for international humanitarian law will be given explicit importance.

And always remember the importance of counting on civil society organisations in the development of his mandate in all his actions and especially in his visits to Colombia.

Thank you in advance for your attention.

International Office for Human Rights Action Colombia – ODHACO

i El Espectador. Ceasefire, installation of dialogues and other key moments of Total Peace in 2023. 28 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memoria/paz-total-momentos-clave-de-la-politica-de-gustavo-petroentre-ceses-al-fuego-negociaciones-y-acuerdo-de-paz/>

ii High Commissioner for Peace. Installation of the National Participation Committee: "When a society has hope, it changes". 3 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Instalacion-del-Comite-Nacional-deParticipacion.aspx>

iii In the case of Buenaventura, the truces between Buenaventura's gangs have led to a reduction in homicides of around 90%, and several social projects led by these structures are taking place in different communities in the port. See at: <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memoria/shottas-y-espartanos-asi-van-los-dialogos-de-petro-con-bandas-debuenaventura-tras-un-ano/>

iv El Espectador. Constitutional Court leaves the Total Peace law alive, but sets limits. 30 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/corte-constitucional-deja-con-vida-la-ley-de-paz-total-pero-le-pone-limites/>