

Brussels 12 March 2025

Statement by OIDHACO, members and allies.

In response to the recent statements of President Gustavo Petro stigmatising social organisations in Colombia.

The International Office for Human Rights - Action Colombia (Oidhaco)¹ **rejects any kind of stigmatisation against social organisations and human rights defenders and we call on the European Union, its member states, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Norway to publicly express their support for the people and organisations that defend human rights and build peace in Colombia.**

We support the [call of Colombian human rights and peace platforms and organisations](#), who demand a rectification by President Gustavo Petro, regarding the stigmatising statements he made during the televised Council of Ministers on 3 March, focused on the humanitarian crisis in Catatumbo. In this context, the president made serious statements linking social organisations in the region with illegal armed actors. We recall that these are organisations that, as evidenced by the Colombian [Ombudsman's Office](#) itself, have been contributing to the defence of human rights and peace-building for decades, *"in a context of a lack of comprehensive and effective protection by the state"*, and having suffered serious violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Today they demand that the president retract his statements as they exacerbate the stigmatisation of organisations that are already victims of state neglect, suppress guarantees for their political participation and deepen their risk status vis-à-vis illegal actors.

As is well known, Catatumbo is one of the areas of Colombia historically most affected by the impacts of the armed conflict. It is currently experiencing one of the most serious humanitarian crises due to the intensification of violence caused by the clashes between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and FARC dissidents: in just a few weeks, more than 50,000 people have been displaced and more than 70 people have been killed, including six signatories of the Peace Agreement.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the recent [annual report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), despite some progress, the situation of human rights defenders in the country continues to be critical, with murders, threats, surveillance and stigmatisation persisting. In this regard, we recall that the Presidency of the Republic of Colombia itself, through Presidential Directive 07/2023, emphasises *"the importance of recognising the work of these people (human rights defenders) and combating any form of stigmatisation they may have experienced. The executive is committed to contributing to the investigation and punishment of all forms of violence against those who defend human rights in the country"*.

¹ A network of 40 European and international organisations dedicated to the promotion of human rights and peacebuilding in Colombia.

For all the above reasons, we request:

- The **European Union, its member states, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Norway** to publicly express their support for human rights defenders and peace-building organisations in Colombia.
- The **Government of Colombia** to:
 - immediately retract the serious accusations made against social organisations in Catatumbo,
 - move forward as quickly as possible with the approval of a public policy of comprehensive guarantees for human rights defenders,
 - fully implement the 2016 Final Peace Agreement,
 - reactivate the talks with the ELN and to redouble its efforts for a negotiated solution with the other armed actors.

In the meantime, it is urgent that progress be made on humanitarian agreements to alleviate the very serious situation of the civilian population in the territories, particularly the ethnic and peasant communities in Colombia, and in particular those at greatest risk, such as the Catatumbo region.

