

Bogotá, July 25, 2012

Call by the Forum ACT Colombia to the national and international ecumenical community and all people committed to peace

Who are we?

ACT Alliance (Action by Churches Together) is a global alliance of churches and agencies related to the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) that is committed to working ecumenically. In Colombia, ACT is represented by humanitarian organizations including Christian Aid, Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, Lutheran World Relief (LWR), Iglesia Evangélica Luterana de Colombia (IELCO), PCS - ICCO/KIA, Federación Luterana Mundial (FLM), CREAS, Red Ecuménica de Colombia, Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia (IPCOL), JUSTAPAZ, Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz (HEKS), MENCOLDES, Diakonía Suecia.

Our mission

As churches and church-related organizations we work together for a positive and sustainable change in the lives of those affected by poverty and injustice, through coordinated and effective action in the field of humanitarian work, development and advocacy.

In response to humanitarian situations, we accompany and provide humanitarian assistance.

Yes to protection, not stigmatization

Forum ACT Colombia urges protection for civilians in Northern Cauca

To survive in the midst of permanent fighting, with the fear that a bullet kills you or severe harassment forces you to flee: The population in Northern Cauca has been living this sad reality for many years. A few weeks ago, armed hostilities escalated. At this stage of the conflict, international humanitarian agencies that are part of the Forum of the ACT Alliance (Action by Churches Together) in Colombia are calling on the armed groups to not involve civilians in the fighting, as per international humanitarian law.

Civilians tired of continuing violations of international humanitarian law

"The civilian population in the municipalities of Jambaló, Toribío, Miranda, Caloto, Caldono, Suárez, Santander de Quilichao and Corinto has been enduring strong impacts of the armed conflict," states the Foundation "Tierra de Paz", which runs projects in the region together with Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, a member of the ACT

Alliance. "Between January and May, there was strong fighting every other day on average. As of June, fighting became permanent, which is to say on a daily basis."

The armed harassments often take place in the middle of villages, in violation of international humanitarian law. This results in civilians being killed or injured and the permanent displacement of entire communities, which affects people of diverse identities, ethnicities and beliefs. "We observe great exhaustion of the population due to the very long lasting conflict" explains "Tierra de Paz".

Ultimatum by Indigenous people to remove armed groups from their territory

Some of the communities most affected by the armed conflict have been the Indigenous Nasa. "Since childhood we learn where to take refuge in case of an attack, how to prevent injuries by land mines and how to reject offers of recruitment by illegal armed groups," says a young Nasa representative. A year ago, the explosion of a bomb placed in a vehicle by an illegal armed group in Toribío caused several deaths and the destruction of half the homes in the village. At that time, the assembly of the Indigenous authorities of Northern Cauca identified as its objective the expulsion from their territories of all armed groups.

After a mortar exploded on July 8 near a health center in Toribío, wounding four persons, the Indigenous people acted. They issued an ultimatum to all armed actors demanding that they leave their traditional land. This led to the immediate withdrawal of some guerrilla units. On July 17, hundreds of Indigenous people peacefully expelled soldiers from a military base on Berlín Hill, close to Toribío, which resulted in a confrontation with security forces.

For the most part, the national media characterized the resistance by Indigenous groups as peaceful, but some outlets focused on the efforts by Indigenous peoples to expel the military from their territory and this led to the stigmatization of the Indigenous groups by some members of Colombian society.

At a meeting on July 19 between the Indigenous community, led by the Indigenous organizations CRIC and ACIN, and representatives of government agencies, the path for negotiations was outlined.

Call by the Forum ACT Colombia to the national and international ecumenical community and all people committed to peace

As members of the Forum ACT Colombia:

1. We reject all violence against civilians. We urge all armed groups to comply with international humanitarian law protecting civilians from hostilities.
2. We support all actions and negotiations to promote peace. We ask the Colombian government to support the Indigenous community in their protective actions and to listen to their proposals for peace.

3. We reject any stigmatization of the civil actions by Indigenous communities, and any false accusations about civilians.

4. We urge the Government to strengthen social investment in the North of Cauca, especially in health and education. We expect the investments, announced by President Juan Manuel Santos on July 11 in Toribío, to materialize.

5. We call upon the international community in Colombia, specifically the G-24 countries, to monitor the humanitarian situation in Northern Cauca, and urge armed groups to comply with the international humanitarian law.

We alert the authorities of Colombia and humanitarian organizations about the imminent worsening humanitarian crisis in Northern Cauca if dialogue fails between the Indigenous authorities and the government, and if the Indigenous community perseveres in its determination to expel the armed (state or non-state) actors from their territories.

For more information:

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