
The peacebuilding efforts of the Colombian Church: “We ensure accompaniment, guidance for discernment as well as a patient and sincere listening ear”

A fundamental, perhaps historic step - it will be clear in the coming months - in the direction of lasting peace for Colombia. However, unless a comprehensive peace, based on outright social justice, is pursued in the country's most remote and forsaken territories, addressing the root causes of decades-long violence, that step will remain insufficient. On Friday June 9 Colombian President Gustavo Petro, and the leaders of the National Liberation Army (ELN) - the last Marxist guerrilla group still operating in Latin America - signed a six-month ceasefire deal in Havana, a prerequisite for a final agreement. Meanwhile, in Cartagena, on the initiative of the Colombian Bishops' Conference and of the Secretariat for Social Pastoral Care, bishops from zones still embroiled in conflict and violence due to manifold factors came together for a meeting. The root causes of the conflict include - besides the ELN - FARC dissidents, members of the Gulf Clan paramilitary group, criminal gangs and drug lords. This coincidence highlights the fact that peace can certainly be forged at the negotiating table, but also, and above all, in the territories. President Petro direly needed this cease-fire deal: his “comprehensive peace” goal, trumpeted at the start of his mandate last year, risked becoming nothing more than an empty slogan in a country where, according to the NGO Indepaz, there have been 44 mass killings, with a total of 72 social and environmental leaders killed since the beginning of the year. The 2016 peace agreement with the FARC, which had an important but not decisive impact on the Colombian conflict, should serve as a lesson. **Church accompaniment.** Contacted by SIR, Father **Rafael Castillo**, dynamic director of the Secretariat for Social Pastoral Care at the Colombian Church, said in clear terms: “We have positive news from Havana. The message is that peacebuilding efforts cannot be postponed and must be pursued with all our strength, and by speaking with all those involved. Regarding the ELN, the Colombian Church confirmed its continued support for maintaining the cease-fire. “We provide accompaniment, guidance for discernment as well as a patient and sincere listening ear.” For the priest, the local communities deserve special attention: “Lasting peace can only spring from the grassroots level. A dialogue amongst leaders is not enough. It's a complex path. For instance, it should be noted, with respect to the ELN, that not all local leaders will implement the directives immediately. Nor must we forget the other parties involved. Moreover, the overall context should be that of restorative justice and community justice, paying particular attention to the incubators of violence and injustice, like drug trafficking, illegal mining, kidnappings and extortion. The so-called 'comprehensive peace' must be sought with all players, and the peace negotiating tables must also have a local dimension.” A strong emphasis on the local dimension emerged at the bishops' meeting in Cartagena that featured “numerous testimonies of mission carried out against the backdrop of bloodshed and threats.” **Voices from the dioceses.** The Church's accompaniment efforts, carried out in collaboration with various entities, were highlighted by two bishops attending the Cartagena conference, interviewed by SIR. We spoke with Msgr. **Israel Bravo**, Bishop of Tibú. The Catatumbo region in north-east Colombia (department of Norte de Santander), on the border with Venezuela, where he serves, features an area with the world's greatest amount of coca plantations and the highest number of armed, criminal groups. Among other things, this is one of ELN 'fiefdoms'. “The news of the ceasefire arriving from Havana is certainly reason for hope,” he said. “However, the situation on the territories is marked by tensions. There are many active armed groups, along with many illegal activities: drug trafficking, illegal oil extraction, clandestine extraction in underground mines.” The geographic proximity with Venezuela doesn't help. “On top of this - the bishop remarked - the chronic absence of the State and the lack of opportunities for development, especially for young people, are conspicuous. In short, Catatumbo has been a no man's land for years.” The Church is doing everything possible to bring hope and support to the people: “Our efforts are directed at consolidating our presence, promoting educational activities for

children and young people, along with providing a welcome for migrants. Healthcare projects and for supporting the campesinos, small farmers, with the aim of replacing coca with other crops, are being pursued. Residents in these areas cherish their land, and they must be guided towards development initiatives and for democratic consolidation. However, the constant presence of the State and its institutions is an indispensable precondition." The Colombian department of Putumayo, in the south of the country, located along the Ecuadoran and Peruvian borders. is a further epicentre of coca cultivation. "The ELN is not active on our territories - said Msgr. **Joaquín Humberto Pinzón**, bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Puerto Leguizamo-Solano and Consolata missionary - . This guerrilla movement has a strong presence especially in the Northeast and along the Pacific coast, although naturally, we welcomed the good news of the cease-fire. Dissident FARC rebels are present (EMC, Iván Mordisco and Nueva Marquetalia), members of the Gulf Clan paramilitary movement, along with the criminal gang named Commando de la Frontera, in the south of the region. In essence, this is an important drug trafficking hub, starting with cocaine production, although, for unknown reasons, the cocaine industry saw a sharp slowdown in recent months." A tragic incident occurred in Putumayo last May 14: four indigenous Murui children were killed while trying to escape forced recruitment by the EMC-FARC dissident rebels. "What happened is unfortunately not uncommon, as it reflects our difficult reality, which involves all armed groups. These youths were raised surrounded by firearms, they were forced to become adults very quickly, despite their very young age and the psychological condition of a child. They are forcibly recruited and defection is tantamount to betrayal. That's what occurred in the past few weeks, even though the local community stood up in defence of these youths." Also in this case, the Church is one of few entities that brings hope. "We follow three main criteria - explained Monsignor Pinzón -: first of all, to be present, participating in the lives of the children, young people, indigenous people, campesinos; then, to listen; finally, to provide solutions. We have a number of projects underway, mostly in the field of education. We also run a school for forming indigenous and campesino leaders, in addition to soup kitchens to cater for the poorest families." (*) *journalist at "La vita del popolo"*

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