



Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration

Testimony by Hector Gaviria

Colombia is land blessed, thanks to its excellent location in South America, and its population with their tradition as hardworking people. Nevertheless, profound social divisions and serious political exclusion have caused waves of brutal violence. Sixty years ago, these led to the outbreak of an internal armed struggle with the emergence of the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC and other guerrilla groups. From the opposite end of the political spectrum, right wing armed para-military movements also emerged, plunging the country into one of the world's most serious humanitarian crises.

One of the worst massacres in our history took place in 2002 in a territory of tropical rainforest, when in the midst of combat, the population sought refuge in a chapel when an improvised bomb exploded in the Church, killing around a hundred people. The parish priest and a group of people from the community survived and spent days walking through the forest. Caritas, hand in hand with the local Church, started the long task of rebuilding the lives, the hopes and the social fabric of this community and of so many others who lived alongside the rivers, whilst the war continued to be waged throughout the territory, leaving behind thousands of dead, disappeared and internally displaced communities. In December 2015, in an act which had been yearned for, and demanded by the Afro-descendant communities, a leader of the FARC guerrillas arrived in the region to celebrate a ceremony to recognise their responsibilities and to seek forgiveness from the victims.

More than three years ago, the process of dialogue between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas started in Cuba, and the final agreement was signed on the 26th September in Cartagena. One of the major tasks of Caritas in Colombia has been the support of the victims to ensure the restitution of their rights. In fact, it was Caritas and the Bishops' Conference who raised their voice in 1994 to demand public policies to deal with a situation which affects more than six million people today, which means that we are one of the countries in the world most affected by this drama.

In another Colombian region on the border with Venezuela, the conflict has been extremely complex given the multiplicity of armed actors in the territory and the challenge of the border itself. Here we have been able to join forces with the Lutheran World Federation, to respond to the cry of the communities in need of protection. A leader of a Colombian Womens' Association, described dramatically the litany of constant assassinations of the farmers in the

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region when she said "we women are being left alone with only our children". This territory, like others in Colombia is scourged by the presence of anti-personnel mines which have been planted by illegal groups. Sadly, Colombia occupies the second place in the world of countries affected by anti-personnel mines, and even if progress is made in building peace after the signing of the accords with the FARC guerrillas, and if agreements are reached with other guerrilla groups, the impact of these mines will continue for at least a decade.

A survivor of the anti-personnel mines told us "Caritas and the Lutheran World Federation have been our right hand in social and community processes, they have been the driving force which has given life to the Association of Survivors of anti-personnel mines".

We have high hopes in this period of implementation of the accords signed with the FARC guerrillas to end the armed conflict. Holy Father, we thank you wholeheartedly for your closeness to the process of peace-building in Colombia. Your prayers and messages insisting that we must not lose this opportunity have reached even the most remote communities in our country.