

PRESS RELEASE

Human Rights in Colombia must be a priority for all political parties

On international human rights day genuine steps must be taken to combat attacks on human rights defenders in Colombia

Brussels, December 10, 2013. In 2014 in both Colombia and the European Union important elections will take place. The dialogues in Havana between the government and the FARC are a step towards building peace in Colombia, but as we have said repeatedly, this is only one step and much needs to be done to achieve lasting peace. In **Oidhaco** we are concerned that in 2013 human rights violations have increased rather than decreased, as shown by the steady rise in killings of human rights defenders; by September, 52 men and women who struggled for human rights in Colombia had been killed. The Colombian Constitutional Court has stated that sexual violence is a crime perpetrated by all the armed actors and that it is 'a habitual, extensive, systematic and invisible practice'. Colombia has the highest number of human rights violations in the western world.

A large part of the Colombian population have their hopes pinned on the possible peace agreements, and are insisting that they include truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non- repetition for the millions of victims of the conflict. That is why **Oidhaco** is calling on all Colombian and European political parties standing in the 2014 elections, to ensure that respect for human rights in this country is a priority in their election manifestos.

"We know that peace is not merely the absence of weapons", says **Vincent Vallies**, spokesperson for the organisation. "There has been a serious land distribution problem in Colombia for decades, shown in recent years by the 5.7 million internally displaced persons, driven from their lands by violent methods" continues **Vallies**. "Trade unionists are still being killed for their work, as well as land restitution leaders, indigenous leaders, farmers and Afro-Colombians" the spokesperson warns.

In parallel with the talks between the government and the guerrillas, if solutions to the underlying problems of the conflict, including social inequality, are not put on the political agenda, peace will not be possible. Social protest has been criminalized, and leaders and defenders have been arrested for their work defending human rights, such as in the case of renowned human rights defender David Ravelo, who has been unjustly sentenced to more than 18 years in prison as a result of a trial in which there were no guarantees for his defence. Those who demand the fulfilment of their rights are stigmatized as supporters, helpers or members of guerrilla groups. This message, transmitted from the government via the media to civil society, gives a false view of the social conflict in Colombia's collective imagination. "It is essential that the highest levels of the Colombian government provide guarantees for both the political opposition and for social protest for communities and sectors of Colombian society. Without that, Colombia cannot leave violence behind and achieve peace", says **Vincent Vallies**.

"Today as we celebrate World Human Rights Day, we ask European and Colombian political parties to include in their programs the urgent need for human rights to be respected in Colombia" **Vallies** concludes.