

HUMAN RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA

COLOMBIA has one of the world's worst human rights records. A civil war that began in the 1960s forms the backdrop for a state that fails to provide guarantees for the respect of human rights. In many cases state agents themselves are responsible for atrocities. Over the last 25 years tens of thousands of people have been 'disappeared' or killed, thousands have been victims of torture, and millions forcibly displaced.

All sides in the conflict commit abuses. However, over time the extent of the relationship between the state and paramilitary forces, which led Human Rights Watch to call them the Colombian army's "6th Division", has become clear. Although the scale of abuses has fluctuated over time both paramilitaries and state agents, often in coordination with each other, continue to target trade unionists, opposition politicians, student leaders, human rights defenders, indigenous and afro-colombian people, journalists and others critical of state policies.

The Colombian government has carried out a long-standing, sophisticated public relations campaign to convince the international community that it is not part of the problem and that things are improving. The facts tell a different story.

“The Colombian state is still implicated in a large proportion of the human rights abuses in Colombia. State security forces and those directly linked to them are responsible for the murder of trade unionists, human rights activists, community leaders and students. Virtually no-one is brought to justice for these horrendous crimes.”

Frances O'Grady,
TUC Deputy General Secretary

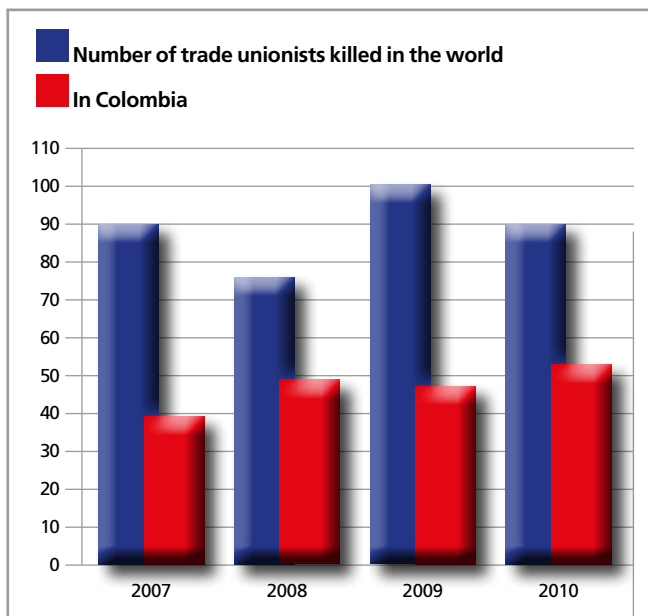
Supported by



POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS

According to the Colombian trade union confederation (CUT) nearly **3,000** trade unionists have been killed since 1986. Peace campaigners, members of the political opposition and those protesting against human rights abuses are also targets of violence. Right-wing paramilitary death squads and state forces are responsible for most of the killings.

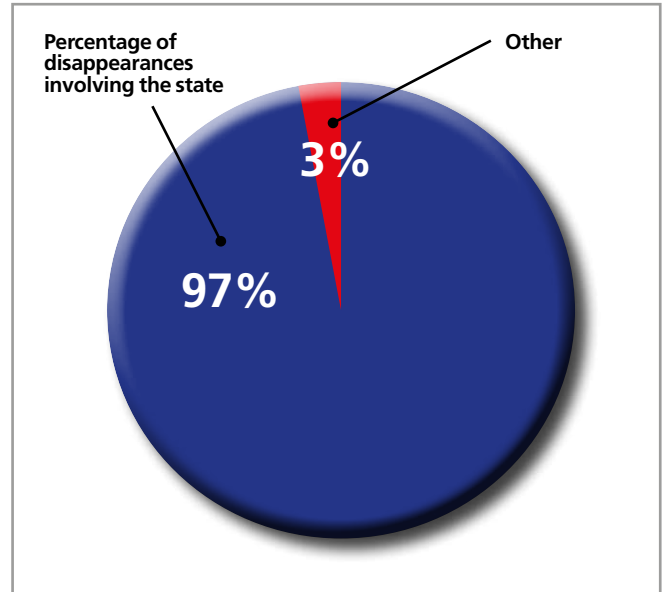
Under President Uribe (2002-2010) the repression was particularly severe, with **573** trade unionists assassinated. Under President Juan Manuel Santos the killings of trade unionists have continued with 61 trade unionists killed since he took power in August 2010, and **6** killed in the first 3 months of 2012.



Recent reports on Colombia show a slight reduction in assassinations. Colombian unions argue that this shows a change of tactic towards targeted killings. For example in the first 16 months of the Santos government **192** social activists were killed, one every three days.

“It is outrageous that Colombia is treated as a civilised and democratic partner whilst these horrific abuses continue.”

Jim Sheridan MP



FORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Colombia has one of the highest figures of forced disappearances in the world. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in May 2011 that there were more than **57,200** recorded cases in Colombia, mostly “committed by state agents and paramilitary forces who collaborated with them.” In the first six months of 2011 at least **40** people were forcibly disappeared in the department of Antioquia alone. According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists between 2002 and 2007 “state functionaries were compromised in **97%** of disappearances.”

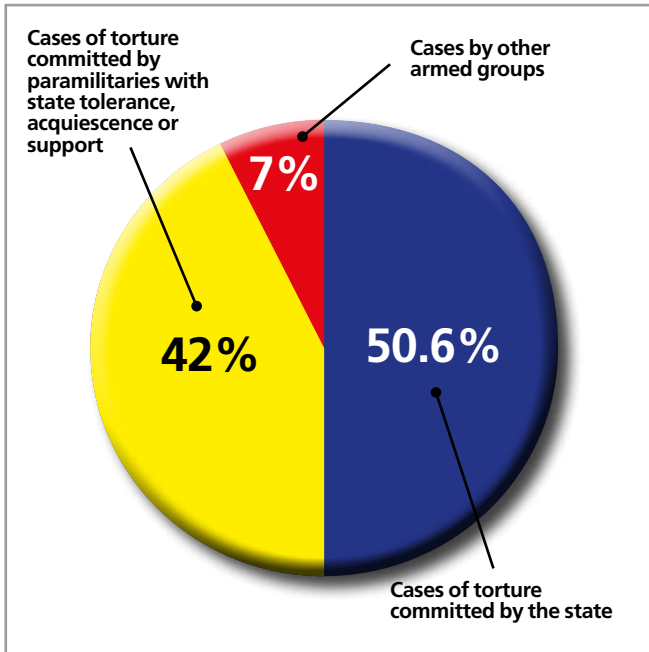
POLITICAL PRISONERS

There are currently hundreds of political prisoners in Colombian jails although the government denies their existence. They are trade unionists, human rights defenders and civil society activists. They are held without being convicted of any crime, and are often denied access to water, food and medicine. The UN has received “continuing complaints of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in prisons”. According to the UN in 2009, such prisoners are “usually held without proper legal justification, in some cases for up to two years.”

FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Colombia has the highest number of internally displaced people in the world. Since 1985 over **5 million** people have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Many of those displaced end up living in abject poverty in shantytowns around the country’s major cities. According to the Inter American Commission for Human Rights “the plundered lands continue to be under the control of the illegal owners.” Although a recently passed law provides a legal framework for their return, the

reality is that without protection for returnees the effect will be limited. Additionally the Colombian Government is not addressing the problem of existing right-wing paramilitary groups, and displacement continues to grow. Between January 2011 and January 2012 **17** displaced leaders were killed.



TORTURE

It is difficult to know how many people are tortured in Colombia since it usually occurs alongside abuses such as assassination and forced disappearance. According to the Colombian Commission Against Torture "the practice of torture is systematic and generalised." There were 899 documented cases of torture between 2003-2008, of which over **90%** were committed by, or with the involvement of the state. According to a 2010 report by the UN "the incidence of torture in the State party remains high", the UN is particularly concerned that state agents are reportedly involved in an "increased number of cases."

EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS

According to human rights groups over **1,500** civilians were killed by the armed forces between 2002-2009, but many cases remain unreported for long periods of time and the true figure may well be higher. Such extrajudicial killings continue. Often the bodies are dressed in military uniforms and presented as 'guerrillas' killed in combat.

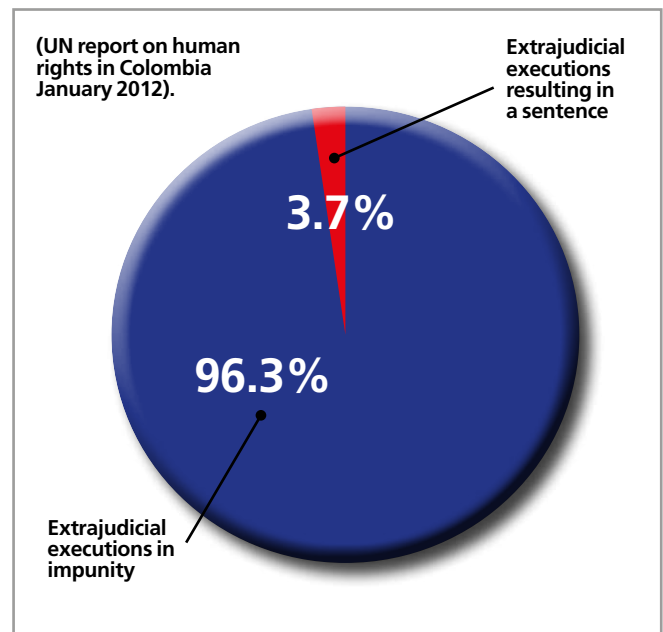
According to a UN Report from 2011 "There have been too many killings of a similar nature to characterise them as isolated incidents". According to Amnesty International "The security forces' counter-insurgency strategy is largely based on the premise that those living in conflict

areas are part of the enemy" It is this attitude, bolstered by the provision of rewards in exchange for bodies that has created a climate where this crime can flourish. A 2009 UN report even said that the number of killings carried out by the army could constitute a "crime against humanity." Many of these killings were committed while Juan Manuel Santos, the current President, was Minister of Defence.

Since 2008 the Colombian government introduced a series of regulatory steps, but as the UN noted in its 2011 report, it is too early to judge their effectiveness, and since there are "real gaps between the policies as they exist on paper and the practice on the ground", and as human rights groups continue to report executions by the army, there are real grounds for scepticism.

IMPUNITY

Almost no-one is brought to justice for human rights violations in Colombia. With regard to extrajudicial executions by the army, impunity runs at over **96%** and according to the UN "Soldiers simply knew they could get away with murder." Impunity for the killing of trade unionists stands at **96%**. Colombian human rights groups accuse the government of a "lack of political will" to deal with the problem.



“Colombia still leads the world in killings of trade unionists”

Human Rights Watch World Report 2011

ABOUT JUSTICE FOR COLOMBIA

JFC supports Colombian trade union and civil society organisations in their work to defend human rights and workers' rights, and fight for peace and social justice. JFC supports Colombian civil society efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution to Colombia's 60 year civil war, and campaigns to defend human and labour rights. JFC lobbies the UK and Irish governments, as well as the European Union, to put more emphasis on trade union and human rights in their relations with Colombia.

What you can do:

- Visit the JFC website, get informed and get involved in our campaigns
- Contact your MP and MEPs to ask them to speak out about human rights abuses in Colombia
- Affiliate to JFC or donate to the campaign through our website
- Spread the word about the reality of the Colombian conflict

Justice for Colombia is supported by the following organisations



www.justiceforcolombia.org