

Colombia

In 2019, the protection of human rights in Colombia was hampered by the country's continued struggle to ensure peace, three years after the government signed an historic agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The situation of the country's human rights defenders (HRDs) remained a particular concern, and despite minor improvements in the conviction rate, the level of violence against HRDs continued to be worryingly high.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that 107 HRDs were killed in 2019, compared to 110 in 2018. While each attack was a product of its local context, the violence was particularly concentrated in areas with high levels of multidimensional poverty, where organised criminal armed groups were fighting for control of illicit economies following the withdrawal of the FARC, and where the state has little presence. The Cauca region saw the most HRDs killed, approximately 30. A disproportionate number of indigenous leaders were caught up in the violence, as different armed groups disputed local coca cultivation and drug trafficking routes.

The Colombian government reiterated its commitment to protecting HRDs, and there were some advances. Impunity fell, albeit from a high level, helped by the improved capacity of the Attorney General's special unit that investigates violent attacks against HRDs. It reported convictions in 20% of the cases it investigated in 2018, up from 14% in 2016. However, the overwhelming majority of convictions are of those who carried out the attacks (usually hired hitmen), rather than of those who ordered them, making it difficult to break the cycle of violence.

October's regional elections were the most violent for at least ten years, with 22 candidates killed^[18]. The murder of Karina Garcia—a candidate for mayor of Suárez in Cauca—along with five others on 1 September shocked the country. Although election day itself was peaceful, the government confirmed that its National Protection

Unit had been supporting over 1,100 candidates deemed under threat.

The UK directly supported around 450 at-risk HRDs in 2019, through training to improve protection and security, as well as legal support to fight impunity in cases of attacks. More widely, as part of our package of support to the peace deal, the UK helped strengthen the capacity of the Attorney General's Office, including the special unit that deals specifically with attacks on HRDs. We have also provided support to environmental and land-rights defenders, and helped strengthen the Ombudsman's early warning system and institutional follow-up mechanisms.

The full implementation of the peace deal with the FARC remains the country's best hope for improving the security of social leaders, including HRDs, especially the formally established pillars 1 (integrated rural reform) and 4 (substitution of illicit crops) of the agreement. Despite the government's overall commitment to the peace deal, it is in these two areas where implementation is the slowest, because of budget constraints, vested interests, and the reality on the ground. The latest UNODC figures indicate that coca cultivation fell slightly in 2018, according to the UNODC. However, productivity increases (some farmers report being able to harvest their coca bushes more than five times a year) mean cocaine production, and therefore illicit financing, were at historic highs.

In 2019, the UK continued to provide support to help Colombia address the legacy of sexual violence from its 53-year internal conflict. Over the past three years, UK support to La Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales, a network of survivors of sexual violence, has helped document 1,200 new cases, which are now before the transitional justice system. Gender-based violence remains a serious problem in Colombian society. The UK funded work to train rural medical professionals in how to attend cases of sexual violence, including with a view to preserving evidence to encourage convictions.

In 2019, Colombia ranked 129th out of 180 in the Reporters without Borders

Media Freedom Index, with the main threats being violence and self-censorship. During nationwide protests that followed the 21 November national strike, the Colombian Press Freedom Foundation reported 27 attacks on members of the press. They included 22 by security forces, amid widespread criticism from civil society organisations of excessive use of force. In 2019, the UK provided financial support to the Press Freedom Foundation, supporting efforts to train journalists in self-protection mechanisms. In the run-up to October's regional elections, we helped broker a pact in which nine political parties undertook publicly not to spread disinformation.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

There was no improvement in the dire human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 2019. The regime continued to exert control over nearly every aspect of citizens' lives: they were told what to believe, what to consume, and where they could travel. Those who defied the state could face imprisonment or even death.

The DPRK Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, expression, speech, the press, demonstration, and association. In reality, DPRK citizens did not enjoy any of these freedoms. The DPRK remained top of Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians experience extreme persecution, and came 179th out of 180 in the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

The DPRK authorities continued to deny allegations of human rights violations and to refuse human rights practitioners access to the country. They continued to refuse to cooperate with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights or with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in North Korea, Tomás Ojea Quintana. The regime continued to refuse to act on the 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry report, which

[18] According to the fourth "Electoral violence report" of the Colombian civil society organisation *Fundación Paz y Reconciliación*

had highlighted wide ranging and ongoing “crimes against humanity”.

In May, Korea Future Initiative released a report entitled ‘Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex and Forced Marriage of North Korean Women and Girls in China’. The report gave detailed accounts of women and girls being trafficked from the DPRK to China for prostitution and forced marriage, and the misery and suffering they endured.

In October, the UN Special Rapporteur reported to the UNGA Human Rights Committee, focusing on food insecurity and on the ongoing suppression of basic freedoms. The UN estimates that 10.9 million people in North Korea are undernourished.

Throughout 2019, the UK continued to raise and challenge the DPRK’s human rights record in multilateral fora. The UK was a main sponsor, through the EU, of resolutions on the situation of human rights in the DPRK adopted by the UN Human Rights Council and UN Third Committee in March and November respectively. Both resolutions recalled the DPRK’s responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity, and urged the DPRK to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur by giving him unrestricted access to the country. At the UN General Assembly in October, we called on the Government of the DPRK to show the world that freedoms supposedly enshrined in its Constitution were not a mirage.

The DPRK’s third Universal Periodic Review took place in May. The UK used the session as an opportunity to call on the DPRK to end its use of forced labour; accede to the Convention against Torture; and end all surveillance and censorship contrary to international human rights laws and standards. The DPRK did not, however, respond specifically to the UK’s advance questions or statement during the session, and confirmed to the UN Human Rights Council in September that it did not support our recommendations but had taken note of them instead.

We played a prominent role in enforcing UN Security Council sanctions on the DPRK in 2019. Under UN Security Council Resolution 2397, all UN member

states were required to repatriate all North Korean nationals earning income in their jurisdiction by 22 December. Such workers were forced overseas to earn money for the regime, and often worked in conditions tantamount to slavery in their host country. The UK was at the forefront of international lobbying on this issue, and urged all member states to take seriously their obligation to repatriate DPRK overseas workers so that this exploitation could come to an end. We also played a prominent role in examining the implementation reports submitted to the UN as part of this obligation.

The UK continued to use its bilateral relationship to engage with the DPRK government on its human rights record. Throughout 2019, the Ambassador and other Embassy officials raised human rights in meetings with DPRK officials in Pyongyang, while FCO officials used meetings in London with DPRK embassy officials to do the same. Officials encouraged incremental change where they saw opportunities.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO), which monitors human rights violations in DRC, reported a worsening of the human rights situation in conflict affected areas in 2019. Human rights violations and abuses included sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), arbitrary arrest and detention, and extrajudicial killings. UNJHRO reported that the number of abuses attributed to members of armed groups and militias had increased; whilst those committed by state agents had reduced. However, state agents remained the main perpetrators, committing 54% of documented violations.

Armed groups and militias continued to target and attack civilians indiscriminately. UNJHRO reported an increase in violations and abuses in conflict-affected areas in 2019, including a 32% increase in extrajudicial killings committed by members of armed groups. The UK has supported long-term stability and peacebuilding in eastern DRC through our contributions to the UN peacekeeping mission

MONUSCO (approximately £50 million in FY 2019/20) and the provision of staff officers. The UK used its UN Security Council role to ensure that the protection of civilians was central to the 2019 MONUSCO mandate renewal, alongside a renewed focus on disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration efforts. In 2019 UK Aid continued to contribute to the DRC Stabilisation Coherence Fund as part of the UK’s six-year £70 million programme focussed on building stability in the east, together with other international partners, including through mediation for local communities affected by violence.

SGBV perpetrated by state agents and armed groups significantly increased in 2019. UNJHRO reported 1,054 adult victims of conflict-related sexual violence in 2019, compared with 650 in 2018. Members of armed groups were responsible for 69% of the abuses during the year. The UK welcomed the International Criminal Court’s unanimous conviction in July of militia leader Bosco Ntaganda for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including crimes of sexual violence. The UK worked with international partners to secure stronger reference to gender issues and the prevention of sexual violence in conflict in the 2019 MONUSCO mandate renewal. The UK also funded a military Gender Advisor to MONUSCO. The UK funded Trial International to secure greater accountability for cases of sexual violence, to build local capacity to document, investigate, and litigate in sexual violence cases effectively. In one of the cases in question, support resulted in the conviction of two armed group combatants for war crimes, enabling more than 100 victims to receive compensation. The UK also funded a project for young filmmakers to raise awareness of sexual violence in conflict and combat social stigma. Other UK-funded programmes supported gender-based violence survivors, including providing free legal assistance to 269 victims of international crimes. Education and health programmes funded by the UK continued to support 820 schools to respond to incidents of gender-based violence, and to provide post-exposure prophylaxis kits to