



Letter addressed to the Honorable Congress of the United States of America

Urgent!: Humanitarian Agreement for the Catatumbo region

1. We are conveying this letter in order to explain the context of violence experienced in the Catatumbo region, located in the North part of Santander-Colombia (border with Venezuela) and the actions taken by the **Mesa Humanitaria y de Construcción de Paz del Catatumbo**¹, which has promoted spaces for socialization and dissemination for respect of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law- IHL. The aforementioned Mesa Humanitaria has also monitored the implementation of the Peace Agreement signed between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and promoted a proposal for a **Humanitarian Agreement** to mitigate the humanitarian crisis that the region is currently facing.

2. The strategy of the National Government to **deploy** more than 10,000 soldiers in the area and to institute Catatumbo as a **Zona Futuro**², has not provided opportune and effective responses. On the contrary, it has contributed to persistent high rates of **violent** actions against the population, as evidenced by the **increase** in numbers of homicide, forced recruitment of minors, and sexual violence; as well as the expansion of paramilitary structures, and the 2020 figures: 6 **massacres**, 17 **homicides** of social leaders and signatories of the Peace Agreement, 1,180 forcibly **displaced** persons, and 33,627 **confined** persons. Likewise, there are records of 5 **extrajudicial executions** caused by the Public Force in the framework of forced eradication of crops for illicit use and the reinforcement of the presence of paramilitary groups such as the Autodefensas Gaitanistas in Tibú and the metropolitan area of Cúcuta.

3. In this context, the **Mesa Humanitaria y de Construcción de Paz del Catatumbo** was created in 2018, as a platform for convergence and joint dialogue, in order to address the current humanitarian situation, monitoring the implementation of the Peace Agreement, and defining short, medium, and long-term actions to overcome the main challenges in Catatumbo, related to humanitarian issues.

4. The Mesa Humanitaria brings together **social actors** such as: Asociación Campesina del Catatumbo, Movimiento para la Constituyente Popular, Comité de Integración Social del Catatumbo, Programa ruta de prevención y protección del Nororiente, Pueblo Indígena Barí, Corporación para la paz y el desarrollo alternativo, Comisión Diocesana de Reconciliación,³ among other social, union, and educational organizations. It also has the support from **institutional actors** such as the Peace Commission of the Senate of the Republic, the North of Santander Government, the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, the Association of Catatumbo Representatives, the Association of Municipalities, the Departmental Council of Peace, the Departmental Assembly and the Municipalities. In addition, it receives the support of **international guarantors** such as embassies, multilateral organizations and cooperation agencies.

¹ Catatumbo Humanitarian and Peace-Building Table.

² The “Strategic Zones of Integral Intervention” or “future zones” are territories defined by the National Government to implement national security strategies; However, this translates into a military imposition for the territories that need an institutional and social presence of the State, lower the high levels of unsatisfied basic needs and consolidate the guarantee of fundamental rights for the inhabitants. These areas have historically been affected by violence and centralizing the presence of the State through control exercises by means of military and police forces which goes against social structure.

³ The Catatumbo Peasant Association, the Movement for the Popular Constituent, the Catatumbo Social Integration Committee, the Northeast Prevention and Protection Route Program, the Barí Indigenous People, the Corporation for Peace and Alternative Development, and the Diocesan Reconciliation Commission.



5. The Mesa Humanitaria registered a **setback** in **humanitarian** matters, as a result of armed confrontations, resurgence of hostilities and the decision to cease the dialogues between the Colombian Government and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

6. As of the signing of the Final Agreement of the Colombian Peace Process, between the Colombian Government and the FARC, a new and different Catatumbo seemed imminent, with hopes for reconciliation. However, the **humanitarian crisis** has increased exponentially.

7. In order to mitigate this situation, since August 28th, 2020, civil society through the Mesa Humanitaria del Catatumbo submitted a proposal for a **Humanitarian Agreement** to the National Government, the ELN, the EPL and other armed actors, in order to humanize the armed conflict in the region. In such proposal, **7 humanitarian minimums** were reflected, namely: the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the identification of civil and social assets, the prevention for the use of anti-personnel landmines and other unexploded devices, the termination of the recruitment of children and adolescents, respect for the mobility of people and sources of economic survival, and respect for health and humanitarian actions. These humanitarian minimums would **materialize** according to the Agreement through a series of **humanitarian actions** from a territorial and differential approach, which the different armed actors could carry out to expand the guarantees in favor of the peasant and indigenous communities of Catatumbo.

8. Consequently, from August 2020 up until the present day, we have received different **expressions of humanitarian willingness** from Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the dissidents of the FARC-EP (33rd Front) and the North-Eastern War Front of the National Liberation Army (ELN) and their **commitment** to the rules of **IHL**. They also have accorded **to recognize** the proposed Humanitarian Agreement as an **urgent approach** to safeguard the life and dignity of civilian population. Nevertheless, Colombian Government **has not manifested** itself in this regard; as mentioned, the only response was increasing armed forces in the region.

9. We consider that the expressions of **willingness** and **disposition** previously indicated, and the approach of Colombian Government indicate the need to continue seeking ways to humanize the current conflict in the Catatumbo region, while attending for a concluding solution. Faced with the stated situation, it is also required that the **international community** gets involved in the attendance of the humanitarian crisis and the implementation of concrete responses such as the aforementioned Humanitarian Agreement.

10. For this reason, it is indispensable that next Wednesday, **April 7th at 10:00 a.m.** this Honorable Congress get to know the grave situation that Catatumbo region is experiencing and the true state of the implementation of the Peace Agreement, **directly from the voice of the affected communities** and the **Catholic Church in an event organized by the Washington Office on Latin America**. We request your **support** for this Humanitarian Agreement in order to shield the population from the conflict. Likewise, we require your **aid and assistance** before the Colombian Government to carry out concrete actions to increase the urgent humanitarian development needed.

11. Colombian Civil Society and the Catatumbo region issue an **urgent call** to accompany all actions aimed at **underlining** and **solving** the humanitarian situation in the region and the country. We are convinced that a **collective international effort** is necessary to protect life and human rights in a territory where peace is urgent.
