

## **BISHOPS OF THE PACIFIC COAST SPEAK OUT IN THE FACE OF SYSTEMATIC VIOLENCE IN THE CHOCO**

The bishops of the dioceses and Ecclesiastic Jurisdictions from the Pacific Coast manifest before public national and international opinion our profound concern about the worsening of the systematic violence affecting the region of San Juan and Baudó, Diocese of Istmina-Tadó. We stand in solidarity with the victims and their relatives and we support the actions of the missionary Church in this zone that has spoken out about the constant deaths, disappearances, kidnappings and forced displacements that area residents are suffering and which have horrified the Chocoana community.

For years, families have lived in the midst of the worsening armed conflict that has increased in this region during the second half of 2007; the open struggle of armed groups for territorial control and deals around mining and illegal crops have provoked numerous armed confrontations in the midst of the civilian population, putting them at high risk and in some cases leading to their death. This has taken place despite the increase in the Public Forces in the zone and the demobilization process that last year sought to reintroduce numerous illegal combatants back into civilian life.

These violations of human rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) enjoy impunity as there are no effective actions on the part of Public Forces and State control bodies and the law of violence reigns because of the fear generated by the pressure, threats and constant presence of these armed groups in the midst of the community and among authorities. It is strange that when the State forces increase there are so many deaths and disappearances.

As Churches of the Pacific we witnessed the way the violence has affected the civilian population, the threat that hovers over the lives of communities who ancestrally live on these lands, because these lands, so rich, with such biodiversity, have attracted the extractive attention of national and international capital. In its zeal to extract resources and implement mega-projects, this capital does not take into account the life projects of the communities and has in fact destroyed the lives of area residents.

As Christians, committed to the Gospel that announces life in abundance, we cannot ignore the pain and suffering of our peoples. We cannot remain silent in the face of what is happening; we stand in solidarity with the righteous struggles of indigenous communities, Afro-chocoanas and Mestizo communities who have lost their children in this cruel, senseless war, in the search for lasting and sustainable peace, based on the clarification of the truth, the application of justice and the transformation of the causes leading to the social and armed conflict, that will create the foundation for the social reconstruction of these affected peoples and communities.

We believe that human beings have other means to resolve conflicts, other than through arms and violence in all its forms. Therefore we demand that armed actors withdraw from the territories of these communities, so that they can autonomously exercise their own life plans and traditional authority. That they not fight in the midst of the civilian population, that they respect people's lives and no longer submit them to exile, to being marked for death.

We demand that the state investigate the cases involving the systematic violation of human rights at an individual and community level and the crimes against international humanitarian law. We also demand that it apply the appropriate sanctions to those who have committed these

crimes and that it submit state officials to investigation who have not fulfilled their constitutional role, converting them into accomplices by action and by omission in these cases.

We believe in a Social State of Law, legitimized in a just and dignified social order for all, we reaffirm as Churches of the Pacific our commitment to the construction of peace and in processes of dialogue and joint work, in order to transform the causes that generate violence in our country so we can enjoy another possible world where “love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss.” (Psalm 85:10).

May the spirit of Jesus illuminate us all in this commitment for the lives of each and every person.

- + Fidel León Cadavid Marín, Bishop of Quibdó
- + Héctor Epalza Quintero, Bishop of Buenaventura
- + Gustavo Girón Higueta, Bishop of Tumaco
- + Hernán Alvarado Solano, Bishop of Guapi
- + Luis Adriano Piedrahita, Bishop of Apartadó
- + Alonso Llano Ruiz, Bishop of Istmina – Tadó

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