QUESTION

To ask the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if Ireland has raised concerns with the Colombian authorities directly or at the UN in relation to attacks that are being described as indigenous genocide by reputable persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

REPLY

Worrying levels of violence and intimidation exist in Colombia, and in the wider Latin America region, against indigenous and other human rights defenders. I am aware of the recent events in Cauca Province to which the Deputy refers, which unfortunately act as a reminder of the challenges that Colombia is facing as it implements the peace agreement. Officials at my Department in Dublin and at our new Embassy in Bogotá monitor this important issue closely and I have wholeheartedly condemned on numerous occasions any use of threats, intimidation or violence against those working to defend human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The absence of the State in former conflict areas, including in the Cauca Province, and the demobilisation of the FARC, has resulted in other armed groups gaining control of these areas, primarily to control the illegal economy. This has implications for the security of the local communities, particularly for human rights defenders and community leaders, as witnessed in Cauca.

Our new resident Embassy in Bogotá has been engaging with civil society, EU and multilateral partners on the human rights situation in the country, since it opened at the beginning of the year. We also regularly raise this issue in our exchanges with the Colombian Government, as well as in the Human Rights Council, most recently during the 30th session of the Universal Periodic Review. During this review we highlighted existing issues in Colombia and made a number of recommendations, including that Colombia takes all necessary measures in order to protect human rights defenders against threats and attacks and to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Earlier this year, former Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore in his position as EU Special Envoy to the Colombian peace process, a
role in which he is supported by my Department, led the 11th session of the EU-Colombia Human Rights Dialogue. Particular reference was made to the disproportionately high level of violence against indigenous leaders, and the need for collective protection measures.

Ireland supports the Colombian Government’s full implementation of the peace agreement. The peace process is fundamental to improving the human rights situation in the country and Ireland has contributed over €14 million in support of this since 2007, mainly channelled through the United Nations, and Colombian and international NGOs focusing on human rights, conflict prevention, peace-building and supporting livelihoods for rural populations.

The Taoiseach underlined Ireland’s continuing support for the Colombian peace process in his meeting with President Duque en el marco of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2018. I reiterated this support when I met Foreign Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo during his visit to Dublin in September this year. We also discussed human rights during this meeting. As well as financial support, Ireland has also provided ongoing support in the form of lesson-sharing based on our own experience of peacebuilding and reconciliation on the island of Ireland. We also participate in the EU’s ongoing campaign to recognise and champion the work of human rights defenders in the country.

Officials in my Department in Dublin and at our Embassy in Bogotá will continue to monitor the situation regarding indigenous and social leaders, and other human rights defenders, in Cauca and across Colombia, as Ireland continues to support Colombia in its transition to a stable, peaceful, post-conflict society.
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