

INOVAS Stands with The Protest Movement in Colombia Demanding Social Justice, Human Rights and Peace

We, the undersigned human rights defenders, civil society organisations and victims' associations comprising the International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses (INOVAS), strongly condemn the ongoing repressive conduct of the Colombian government in the face of legitimate protests by the Colombian people calling for social justice, human rights and peace.

The organisations that make up INOVAS stand in solidarity with civil society organisations in Colombia and show their support for their just demands.

Since April 28, Colombian authorities have violently cracked down on peaceful protests that initially broke out in protest against a tax law that sought to increase taxes on the middle class, and to tax basic goods and basic public services (water, electricity, natural gas, etc.), which until now have been exempt. In early May, following spiralling anti-government protests, right-wing president Ivan Duque announced he would ask Congress to "withdraw the law...and urgently process a new law that is the fruit of consensus, in order to avoid financial uncertainty." At the same time, though, the president submitted two other neoliberal laws to the Congress: one that would entrench the privatisation of Colombia's health sector; and another that would eliminate pension substitution and legalise hourly work.

The protests have since expanded to communicate a broad range of public grievances with the government and state such as police brutality, environmental concerns, the little progress made in the 2016 peace accord with the left-wing Revolutionary Army Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group, and the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. A broad public and civil society coalition has joined the movement including teachers, students, trade unions, and Afro-Colombian and Indigenous groups. Cali, in Colombia's west, has become an epicentre for the kind of bottom-up, organised and creative protest movement spreading across the country.

Since April 28, all kinds of human rights violations have taken place including use of lethal force, attempts to militarise and criminalise legitimate protests, and police infiltration by civilian agents who have committed acts of vandalism in order to tarnish protesters. Human Rights Watch says it has "received credible reports of 55 deaths that have occurred in Colombia since the protests began." Civil society organisations maintain that the real numbers are likely much higher. More than five hundred people have been disappeared, while there have been 12 cases of sexual violence committed by state agents and 1,876 cases of illegal detentions and physical violence committed by the police.

As victims and survivors comprising INOVAS, we condemn the Colombian government for seeking to return to the past and violating the rights of the people in the process. As is happening the world over, Colombia's neoliberal economic elites, in clear alliance with other political and military actors, sought to harbour their economic interests by making laws to protect their assets, while placing the economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic on the less privileged in Colombian society.

We ask the international community and international human rights organisations to closely monitor rights violations that are ongoing in Colombia in order to give greater visibility to

demands, from the street to the Colombian government, to demilitarise the streets, respect the life and dignity of protesters, and respect the right to public and peaceful protest in line with Article 37 of the Colombian Constitution.

Protests should not cost the lives of those protesting.

INOVAS is a network formed by, and for, victims and survivors of serious human rights abuses around the world. Launched in 2021, the network INOVAS aims to re-empower victims and survivors through five core activities: advocacy, empowerment of victims and survivors, protection of activists, documentation, and participatory research. Led by victims and survivors, INOVAS links organisations, groups and individuals from across the world—regardless of their colour, race, religion or belief, culture, nationality, gender, sexual orientation or ethnic origin—and aims to provide victims and survivors with a platform to allow their voices as claim-making agents to be heard, facilitating exchanges and reinforces solidarity between victims and survivors worldwide. The network advocates for their rights, and helps to strengthen their participation in national, regional and international processes related to justice, human rights, social change and peace.

Signatories:

Asociación de víctimas Renacer siglo XXI (“Rebirth in the 21st century” Victims’ Association) (Colombia)
Asociación Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas del Conflicto Armado Interno de Guatemala (Q’anil Tinamit) (Guatemala)
Association of Justice and Rehabilitation (Tunisia)
Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon (Lebanon)
Initiative for Vulnerable Persons and Women in Action for Integrated Development (IPVFAD) (Democratic Republic of Congo)
Khulumani Support Group (South Africa)
Network of Families of the Disappeared in Nepal (NEFAD) (Nepal)
Proyecto VOS-Voices of Survivors (USA/Argentina)
Relais Prison-Société Association (Morocco)
Ta’afi (Syria)