

Colombia Protests Briefing



Since the latest round of National Strike mobilisations began on 28 April 2021, Colombian police and apparent para-state agents have committed extreme abuses. The Colombian government have stigmatised the protestors and defended police actions. There has been a deluge of international condemnation.

Background:

- On 28 April 2021, huge mobilisations took place across Colombia to reject a proposed tax reform that would disproportionately increase living costs for lower and middle classes. Protests also focused on long-running demands in response to growing poverty, corruption, murder of social activists and a failed implementation of the peace agreement.
- State forces met the protests with extremely high levels of repression, with several people reported killed and many more injured and missing. State violence was particularly intense in Cali, Colombia's third-largest city. After five days the Colombian government [suspended the tax reform](#) but protests have continued amidst widespread acts of police violence.

Human rights abuses:

- Since protests began, social media videos have shown the brutal police response: shooting live ammunition at crowds, firing gas canisters at [people's faces](#), [beating isolated protesters](#), arbitrary [arrests](#), indiscriminate use of [high-grade weaponry](#) and launching tear gas into [enclosed spaces](#) are some of the abuses committed.
- State agents have committed sexual assaults, with at least 16 cases reported. A 17-year-old took her own life after reporting a group of police sexually assaulted her. She was filmed shouting that police were removing her trousers as they dragged her into the police station.
- Several videos have shown people in civilian clothing shooting at protesters. In one incident, several men exited a truck [and opened fire](#) – protesters reportedly found police IDs and jackets in the vehicle. On another occasion, a man firing at unarmed indigenous protesters while standing alongside a police officer who did nothing. Ten people were injured.
- Human rights organisations (*Temblores/Indepaz*) [recorded](#) 2,110 acts of police violence between 28 April and 17 May, including, 39 people killed, 16 sexual assaults, 1,055 arbitrary arrests and 30 eye injuries.

Colombian Government Stigmatising Protesters:

The Colombian government and its supporters have endangered the lives of protesters by falsely claiming they are backed by guerrilla groups and singling out organisations and leaders:

- [Defence Minister](#), 3 May: "Colombia faces the terrorist threat of criminal organisations".
- [President](#), 9 May: "To members of CRIC [indigenous organisation] I ask you to go home and avoid violent confrontations with the population".

- [Vice President](#), 10 May: “Who is behind the financing of the [indigenous movement]? What activities are they up to that allow them to spend money so freely?”
- Former President Alvaro Uribe was forced to [remove a tweet](#) by Twitter which expressed support for the Army and Police opening fire during protests.

International Response:

- There have been multiple international condemnations of the human rights abuses. [On May 4](#), the UN OHCHR condemned the police use of “excessive force” while the [US Embassy in Bogota](#) called for “restraint” from Colombian police to avoid “additional loss of life”. The EU [called for](#) the “disproportionate use of force by the security forces” to “stop”. 55 Members of the US Congress signed a [letter](#) calling the human rights situation “out of control”.
- A coalition of Colombian organisations [handed a report](#) to the International Criminal Court to investigate the abuses while the Inter American Commission for Human Rights has [requested permission](#) from the Colombian government to investigate recent events.
- The Irish Embassy [said](#) it “reject[ed] violent acts” that “cloud the peaceful protests”.

Who are the Protesters:

- While initial protests were organised by the National Strike Committee formed of trade unions and social organisations, significant elements of the protests have been maintained by people not formally represented in this grouping. Young people from poor urban neighbourhoods have been particularly involved. The National Strike Committee has begun talks with the Colombian government emphasising the need for such groups to be included in talks.
- On 10 May, the National Strike Committee and the government met to [discuss demands](#) including a withdrawal of regressive social reforms, an end to police violence and the initiation of meaningful negotiations. On 16 May, there was a second session with a [single demand](#) for the end of police violence before negotiations could begin.

Priority Demands:

1. Governments and organisations to unequivocally and publicly condemn the violence of the Colombian police and the government’s attempted smears undermining the right to protest.
2. Governments and organisations to call for police reform, specifically removing the police from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence.
3. Governments to immediately review any aid or training support to the Colombian police and suspend any element linked to human rights abuses.
4. Colombian government to immediately cease violence against protesters and ensure full disciplinary and legal investigations against all perpetrators.
5. Colombian government to enter and sustain meaningful negotiations with the National Strike Committee and protesters not currently represented in that space.
6. Colombian government to significantly increase its efforts to implement the 2016 peace agreement during its last year in office.