

## A Charthaoirligh, Teachtaí Dála agus Seanadóirí

1. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today and to listen to what we have to say about the situation in Colombia.
2. I am the Senior General Secretary Designate of Fórsa which, as you know, is Ireland's second largest trade union with more than 80,000 members. I am also one of the two Vice-Presidents of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions having been re-elected last week at the Biennial Delegate Conference.
3. Justice for Colombia is an NGO wholly owned by the British and Irish trade union movement. I currently serve as one of the Irish members of its governing body.
4. In my capacity as ICTU Vice-President I visited Colombia during late November and early December 2016. During the week in which I was there the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, which had been renegotiated following its narrow rejection in a plebiscite the previous September, was ratified by the Congress in Bogota.
5. I was accompanied by the then president of ICTU, two Westminster MP's, a number of senior British trade unionist leaders, an eminent lawyer and a well-known journalist. Our intensive schedule included a range of meetings in Bogota with a variety of human rights and social justice campaigners, the leadership of the main trade union federation CUT, relatives of the "disappeared," and key leaders of the FARC.
6. We then travelled to Buenaventura the main Colombian port through which 60% of trade passes. Here we visited some of the outer suburban slums where people who had been displaced to make way for the expansion of the port were housed. We also saw some of the infamous "chop houses" in the port area itself where

those abducted by paramilitary gangs were dismembered prior to their body parts being scattered in the ocean.

7. Following a journey to the city of Cali we travelled into rural and mountainous Cauca. Here, over the course of a day, we heard the testimonies of around 200 rural dwellers, some of whom had travelled long journeys to meet with us. As this location was one of the designated zones for the re-incorporation of FARC combatants, we also met the local commanders before proceeding to meet with the army leaders, including three colonels, who were stationed in nearby barracks.
8. On return to Bogota our group divided with some travelling to Chiquinquirá prison where a large number of FARC prisoners were being held. I was part of the small group who visited Huber Ballasteros in La Picota prison – he is a trade union leader who at that time had been in prison for more than three years.
9. Prior to returning home I also met with members of the Congressional Peace Commission and the Presidential Counsellor for Human Rights with three of her staff. Some of the delegation met with the Irish ambassador and his officials. The foregoing is not an exhaustive list but it will give you a flavour of the range of contacts made and the distance travelled over six days in Colombia.
10. I am pleased to say that following my return to Ireland Huber Ballasteros was released from prison and, on my proposal, he was invited to attend and to address the ICTU Biennial Delegate Conference that took place in July 2017 in Belfast. It was an emotional moment and one that was fittingly recognised when the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, addressed him personally during his speech to the Conference.

11. The Colombian Peace Agreement contains six main pillars. These relate to:

- **Comprehensive rural reform** which seeks to help rural communities gain access to land and to formalise land titles, to access the means to make this land productive and to participate in the planning of their regions.
- **Political participation** which seeks to open up democratic space and to guarantee rights for the political opposition, to reform an electoral process and to guarantee that politicians and weapons are no longer used together.
- **End of conflict** which seeks to carry out the FARC's disarmament, to guarantee FARC members transition into civilian life and their political, social and economic reincorporation, and to dismantle paramilitary groups and to guarantee secure conditions for former combatants and communities.
- **Solution to the problem of illicit drugs** which seeks to help illicit crop growers transition to legal activity through the implementation of a crop substitution programme, to facilitate treatment for consumers and to fight against the entire chain of drug trafficking.
- **Victims** which seeks to establish a Truth Commission to clarify what happened during the conflict, to bring about justice regarding crimes committed by all actors during the conflict with a focus on truth and restorative justice, to establish a special unit to find the disappeared, to bring about comprehensive reparation for victims and guarantees that these events will never happen again
- **Implementation and verification** which seeks that the Peace Agreement is implemented, to ensure that a commission of

three senior government and three FARC members is established to follow up the implementation process, and to ensure that implementation is accompanied internationally by several institutions and organisations and verified by a UN Special Political Verification Mission.

12. I was struck by important similarities to the Irish Peace Process. While there are differences it is clear that the journey to peace has had many similar elements in both countries. Indeed Irish politicians from all sides, particularly in the north, played an important role in assisting the Colombian process. Justice for Colombia was centrally involved in the coordination of this effort.
13. I was also struck by the importance of the land question in Colombia and comparison that can be made to the way in which land played an important role in Irish history, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century.
14. Since my return from Colombia I have continued to work with Justice for Colombia including, as I have said, serving as one of the Irish members of its governing body.
15. In 2017 my own union Fórsa, through our Developing World Fund, agreed to support the establishment of a JFC Peace Monitor. This work commenced in 2017 and is continuing in an effort to spread awareness about the situation in Colombia so as to help trade unionists and other social leaders there.
16. Two further high level visits to Colombia have taken place. These delegations again comprised parliamentarians, senior trade unionists and lawyers. Two of my senior colleagues have participated and on both occasions they have confirmed the value and importance of these visits, not just because of the effect on morale for Colombian trade unionists and human rights defenders, but also because of the unique access to and exchanges with Colombian institutions and state agencies.

17. Since the Peace Agreement was ratified there has been an upsurge in the level of attacks, threats, intimidation and murder of civil society activists and human rights defenders. You will hear more detail about the scale of this later.
18. I want to acknowledge the efforts of the EU Special Envoy Eamonn Gilmore who has played a hugely important influential role in the peace process itself. I also want to take note of the input of Irish officials during the extended peace talks in Havana. The recent opening of an Irish embassy in Bogota and the appointment of Ambassador Alison Milton should also be acknowledged.
19. The situation in Colombia is grave. As we know in this country peace is fragile and requires constant effort to ensure the necessary balance of measures that are required to sustain a peace agreement once it has been negotiated.
20. It is a source of serious worry that elements of the Colombian Peace Agreement have been ignored, changed or progressed too slowly.
21. Our experience on this island means that we have a special responsibility to assist peace efforts and to point out unacceptable practices, but, all the while, speaking out for the oppressed and those who seek to defend or advocate for them.
22. Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. Human rights defenders regularly encounter violence and death. Civil society activists operate in fear of their lives.
23. Your interest and action as legislators and parliamentarians can make a difference.
24. Justice for Colombia is a very small NGO but it has unique access to, and a credibility with, a wide range of actors in Colombia.

25. My colleague Mariela Kohon served as its director for many years, was then an adviser in the peace process from 2016-2018, prior to taking up an appointment as the Senior International Officer at the TUC earlier this year. I will let her inform you about the path to the Peace Agreement itself, the difficult situation since it was ratified and the current situation that pertains in Colombia.