

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Dé Máirt, 1 Meitheamh 2021

Tuesday, 1 June 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
John Brady,	Catherine Ardagh,
Sorca Clarke,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Barry Cowen,	Joe O'Reilly,
Brian Leddin.	Niall Ó Donnghaile,
	Diarmuid Wilson.

Teachta/Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

2016 Peace Agreement in Colombia: Discussion

Chairman: I have received apologies from Deputy David Stanton.

Item No. 1 on our agenda today is our meeting with the ambassador of Colombia to Ireland. It gives me pleasure to welcome Her Excellency Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz, the ambassador of Colombia to Ireland and Mr. Emilio José Archila Peñalosa, Presidential Counsellor for Stabilisation and Consolidation in Colombia, to discuss matters relating to the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia. I particularly welcome Mr. Emilio José Archila Peñalosa, who is joining us from Bogota at something of an early hour there.

We will hear opening statements from Ms Cortés Ortiz and Mr. Archila Peñalosa before going into a question-and-answer session with members of the committee. As we are somewhat time limited due to Covid restrictions, I ask that members and witnesses be conscious of the time constraints when initially addressing the committee to allow each and every member an opportunity to contribute.

I remind witnesses of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make them identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of that person or entity. Therefore, if statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, the witness will be directed to discontinue his or her remarks and it is imperative that such a direction is complied with.

Witnesses attending remotely, outside the Leinster House campus, should note there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present currently does. I do not anticipate that will arise in the context of this meeting. I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses of the Oireachtas or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I also remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located in the Leinster House complex or in the Convention Centre Dublin, where the Dáil and Seanad are meeting today.

For anybody watching this meeting online, some Oireachtas Members and witnesses are accessing this meeting remotely. Due to the unprecedented circumstances and the large number of people attending the meeting remotely, I ask everybody to bear with us in the event of any technical issues arising.

I invite Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz to make her opening statement.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: A Chathaoirligh, a Theachtaí Dála, a Sheanadóirí. Go raibh maith agaibh.

I thank the committee for the invitation to discuss the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia. I have met with some committee members before and we have always had a fluid and open conversation. I would like to avail of this opportunity to make a brief reference to our bilateral relationship, to the historic gesture of Colombia in receiving 1.8 million Venezuelan migrants and to update the committee on the most significant advances and challenges in the implementation of the agreement.

Both Colombia and Ireland opened embassies in the past three years. We have a rich agenda, focused on developing economic and social opportunities for our people and co-operation. Our relationship is based on our shared values such as the essential role of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The political dialogue has been always permanent and open. President Higgins, visited Colombia in 2017. The former Colombian foreign Minister, Carlos Holmes Trujillo, who sadly passed away recently, paid a visit to Dublin in 2019 as the first Colombian foreign Minister to visit Ireland in the 20 years since the establishment of our diplomatic relations. He visited the Dáil and had a meeting with the committee.

Colombia sees Ireland as a partner that is aligned with the multilateralism scenario. We highly value Ireland's voice at the UN Security Council and the European Union, especially because Ireland understands the challenges and complexities of implementing a peace agreement. We are working on mutually beneficial economic opportunities, especially considering the need to reactivate our economies affected by Covid-19. Colombia has been greatly affected in this regard. We also are working on strengthening ties in education, innovation and science, among others.

I must highlight the key role that Irish investment has in Colombia. It includes companies such as Smurfit Kappa, which has been in the country for more than 75 years, and Viva Air Colombia, owned by the Irelandia Aviation group, which is the second largest airline in Colombia. There are many others which have opened recently in the sustainable energy, infrastructure, forestry, fintech, aviation service and pharma sectors.

There is wide room to improve our opportunities. Visa flexibilisation from Ireland to Colombian citizens will unlock many possibilities to reinforce our people's ties and increase our exchanges in education, trade, investment and tourism. We hope there could be advances on this matter once the Covid-19 restrictions are reduced.

I want to briefly discuss the historic gesture by the Colombian Government regarding the Venezuelan migrant crisis. The massive exodus of Venezuelan migrants due to a multidimensional crisis in that country is the world's second largest refugee wave only after Syria. More than 5 million Venezuelans have fled their country in the past five years. It is unprecedented in Latin America and has regional and even global implications. Colombia hosts approximately 1.8 million migrants, almost 30% of Venezuelans leaving their country in the past five years. Last February, the Colombian Government announced the granting of a temporary protection status to Venezuelan migrants including those in irregular status, which comes to nearly 1 million. This historic step is widely recognised by the international community and organisations, such as the UNHCR, and other agencies. The status will grant them access to health, work, education and other public services. This reflects the Colombian Government's commitment to protecting human rights. We highly welcome the role of the international community through co-operation in this matter.

I will turn to peace implementation. The Government of Colombia is fully committed to the 2016 peace agreement with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC, under the peace with legality policy. My Government has honoured the agreement and the results and measures taken have been recognised in every sphere, including the United Nations Security Council. The agreement is comprehensive, and covers topics on areas such as rural development, political participation, the end of the conflict, the problem of drugs, victims, implementation and verification. It is a transversal component of the current national development plan and

it is incorporated into the Colombian constitution. It is estimated that implementation of the agreement will take at least 15 years, and we are in the fifth year of the process.

Ireland's support for the agreement and its implementation is fully recognised by all Colombians. I express my gratitude for the public support of President Higgins, the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence, Deputy Coveney, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Irish ambassadors in Colombia and New York, the Houses of the Oireachtas, of course, and, in particular, this committee. We also recognise the role of Eamon Gilmore as the EU representative for the peace process in Colombia. Furthermore, we highly value the co-operation of the Irish Government in the implementation, through the UN and the EU, of the trust funds for peace and its sharing of lessons derived from its own experiences and challenges regarding the implementation of a peace agreement. It has taken Ireland more than 23 years to implement the Good Friday Agreement, GFA. Today, Irish authorities recognise that peace implementation is an ongoing process, especially in difficult areas such as truth, justice and reconciliation. The voice of the Irish Government regarding the required permanent commitment and recognition of the advances and challenges in the implementation process is of great importance to us.

I have the honour to be accompanied today by the presidential counsellor for stabilisation and consolidation, Mr. Emilio José Archila Peñalosa, the highest-ranked officer in charge of overseeing the agreement's implementation. He will share with the members of the committee the concrete results of the integral implementation of the agreement's focus on the victims, as well in the areas of integration, political participation, victims and gender, territorial development, truth systems, among others, and he will address some of the current challenges. Counsellor Archila visited Ireland and met with this committee in September 2019 and he has also headed the Colombian Government's delegation in the current national dialogue with the leaders of the recent social mobilisation protests in Colombia.

As I shared with the committee in my recent updates concerning those protests and the accompanying context, I reiterate that the Colombian Government protects and guarantees the constitutional right of citizens to protest peacefully. We condemn all types of violence impacting Colombians, without distinction as to its origin, including vandalism and blockades. I reiterate that my Government has zero tolerance for violations of any human rights and any excessive use of force. The corresponding authorities are investigating all alleged cases with full autonomy. We appreciate the support for the call made by President Duque for this meaningful dialogue and encourage the maintenance of a responsible and constructive approach. I will hand over the floor to Counsellor Archila now. I am sure we all appreciate him taking the time to address the members of the committee, especially given it is 6.30 a.m. in Colombia. The counsellor also has a press engagement at 7 a.m. or 7.30 a.m.

Chairman: Before calling on Mr. Archila, I acknowledge his presence with us again and that he is joining us at an early hour in Bogotá. The ambassador mentioned the visit of the then Foreign Minister, Carlos Holmes Trujillo, to Ireland in 2019. We note that he recently passed away. On behalf of the committee, I extend our condolences to the ambassador and we would be grateful if she would pass on those condolences to the appropriate authorities in Colombia. Counsellor Archila is welcome and, as the ambassador said, the floor is now his.

Mr. Emilio José Archila Peñalosa: I thank the committee and the ambassador very much. I am very grateful for this invitation to address the committee. I reaffirm what our ambassador just mentioned regarding the political willingness and commitment of President Ivan Duque to the full implementation of the agreements with the former FARC through our policy of peace

with legality. I reiterate how grateful we are for the co-operation we received from Ireland. The Irish ambassador in Colombia is a wonderful woman. I feel very acquainted with her.

Obviously, we, the Government of Colombia and President Duque, appreciate the role of Eamon Gilmore, his experience, knowledge and generosity in sharing with us all that experience and knowledge. We feel Ireland's presence in the Security Council is a key element in the understanding at that level of the complexities involved in the implementation of a peace agreement. We think it is important to be aware of the magnitude of what has been accomplished and those challenges which remain. President Duque understands that the agreement was signed not by a government but by the Colombian state. The agreement was incorporated in our constitution and, therefore, part of the presidential mandate is to implement the agreement in good faith and to do it in accordance with all other political policies. That is the reason it was so important for us to issue our policy of peace with legality to enable the transparency that will allow Colombians and the international community to be aware of what we aim to accomplish during these first years of the implementation of the agreement. As the ambassador pointed out, this will be a long-lasting effort.

We have worked on every aspect of the implementation of the agreement and, in each of those elements, we have been committed by President Duque to ensure we take advantage of the 15-year period of implementation. An opportunity arises for Colombia in that regard, because many of the issues that must be addressed are ones that should have been addressed decades ago, with or without the agreement. However, those issues require a longer period of work and consistent advancement to enable what is involved to be achieved. Therefore, in every area of the peace with legality policy, it will be found that we have worked to have long-term planning in place. In addition, no money appeared when the agreement was signed and, therefore, it is necessary for us as a society to focus our resources so they match with the importance we give to the accomplishment of every aspect of the agreement.

This is true in respect of the political guarantees we have granted to the ex-combatants. The committee will be aware that in less than four years the Colombian state changed its constitution and Colombians who were participating in violence and fighting other Colombians are now in the congress. During this period, we granted them security and guarantees so that they could participate in their local elections. We did that efficiently. We had the most peaceful local elections in Colombia of the past 60 years. Many ex-FARC members participated and are now on their local councils as mayors or governors because people voted for them. We worked on granting the legal guarantees that changed our constitution. Now, all of the institutions of transitional justice are working, fully financed and producing results.

At the core of our efforts are the victims. We work in line with what was agreed in the agreement. It was believed that victim law needed to be renewed so that we would have another ten years to compensate the victims. This was done after listening to the victims and learning their expectations. We went to their representatives and took their doubts and expectations to the Congress of Colombia. Now we have a new law.

We have worked on trying to incorporate the ex-combatants, of whom there are a little more than 13,000. We have been able to support them. This was illustrated in our most recent survey of them, which showed that more than 75% viewed their future with optimism. That is far above the level of optimism in the rest of Colombia and probably far above the level of optimism in Ireland.

We understand that working to stabilise the 170 municipalities that were more affected by

violence and poverty is crucial. Therefore, we have the development programmes with a territorial approach, PDETs. These are long-term plans with a territorial emphasis grouping the 170 municipalities into 16 subregions. We have not only produced long-term planning, but we have also focused significant resources compared with the investments that these municipalities received over the past 200 years. We will leave this planning in place until it reaches the point of providing no returns.

We understand that, for Colombia, coca crops are a severe menace and that drug trafficking is the source of many of our country's problems. We have not only maintained the voluntary substitution programme that we received, but we have also created another three programmes, allowing us to move a little more than 100,000 families from growing coca to substitute crops. That is 400,000 Colombians who are no longer involved in an illegal business that produces so much violence and pain.

We have addressed the chapter on rural development and rural reform through productive factors, infrastructure, social development and the environment. We have done all of this with an emphasis on the cross-cutting issues of women, gender and ethnicity. We have been able to implement the most ambitious and successful demining programme. We have addressed every aspect, implemented long-term planning and produced results.

Regarding reincorporation, we have been able to take 98% of ex-combatants into the health system and 98% of ex-combatants are within the financial system. They are in our national pension system. If we count how many of them are involved in a productive project that has been implemented or in are long-term jobs, it amounts to more than 50%. More than 85% of them have attended the type of education that meets their expectations. We have included additional guarantees in respect of, for example, housing. Housing was not foreseen in the agreements, but President Duque understands that we need to work on their housing. We have delivered housing solutions to many of them and we have a plan to ensure that the 13,000 are covered.

Regarding the PDETs for the 170 municipalities that were more affected by violence and poverty, we are investing approximately 5 billion Colombian pesos in those municipalities. This is ten times the budget of the National Roads Institute, INVÍAS, the entity that provides for arterial roads in Colombia. We have supported the transitional jurisdiction by not only not interfering with its work, but by providing the financial support it needed. In line with that, this committee will be aware that we approached the UN Security Council and asked that the UN accompany Colombia in overseeing the completion of the sentences that should start being awarded this year to people who were involved in that violence.

I am glad to be attending this meeting, although I am sorry that it is not in person. I enjoyed my visit to Ireland and I would prefer to be there for this meeting. I hope that a visit can be arranged in the near future. If there are specific questions, I will be more than glad to answer them.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Archila for his attendance and for indicating his willingness to remain for the duration of our meeting and to take observations and questions from members. Deputies Cowen and Brady have indicated.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Chair might proceed to Deputy Brady.

Chairman: I call Deputy Brady.

Deputy John Brady: I bid good afternoon to the ambassador, Ms Cortés Oztiz and the

presidential counsellor, Mr. Archila Peñalosa and thank them for their opening statements. I want to home in on three areas in respect of which I have specific questions for both witnesses. They relate to the ongoing protests urgently taking place across Colombia, human rights in general and the peace protest. We saw major mobilisations commence on 28 April right across Colombia. That was initially to reject the proposed tax reforms that ordinary Colombians would have said disproportionately increased living costs for the lower and middle classes. The protests also focused on long-running demands in response to increasing poverty, corruption, the murder of social activists and the failed implementation of the peace process. Since the commencement of the national strike we have seen gross violations of human rights, arbitrary murders and killings of protestors. Video evidence has been widely circulated on social media showing that the police are guilty. I have seen it as have many other people, including those in human rights organisations. It shows the shooting of live ammunition and the firing of gas canisters at people's faces right into their eyes. That is a practice borrowed from Chile. We have seen where there have been arbitrary arrests, sexual assaults and young people committing suicide as a result of sexual assaults being perpetrated on them by state players. We have also seen many videos of people being shot at by people wearing civilian clothes and these are protesters. In one incident we have seen several men exit from a truck and open fire at civilians, protestors, and later police IDs and jackets were found in that vehicle. It has been widely established by human rights organisations such as Temblores that between 28 April and 21 May it is estimated there have been more than 2,900 cases of police abuse, more than 43 apparent killings by state forces and 39 reported cases of eye injuries mainly as a direct result of the purposeful firing of gas canisters into protestors' eyes. There have been more than 1,200 arbitrary arrests and more than 21 cases of sexual assault. Also, worryingly, there have been reports of hundreds of protestors who have gone missing, having been taken into police custody and whose whereabouts is unknown. There is considerable video evidence online of people who had been taken into police custody having been summarily executed and their bodies having been dumped in rivers by state forces, which is concerning.

I wish to make some specific points regarding that. Only last week the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms Michelle Bachelet, asked for an independent investigation into what is happening in Colombia regarding the state crack down on protestors. Will Colombia support an independent investigation into what is happening there? I listened intently to what the ambassador said. She did not explicitly condemn any human rights abuses against the protestors, including the killings and firing of projectiles into people's faces, but she might take the opportunity to do so. There has been a massive international response to these atrocities. It is not something that happened without being looked upon in horror by the world, hence the welcome statements from the UN High Commissioner. Will the details of all the people who have been taken into police be made public? There is great concern that people who have been taken into police custody have subsequently been found dead on roadsides and in rivers. It is crucially important that full information is made available on people who have been officially arrested and subsequently released and those who are still missing.

I wish to express my solidarity and support for the national strike committee on the need for meaningful negotiations to take place between the Colombian authorities and the committee. I support the national strike committee's principal demand, namely, to stop all violence.

I wish to focus on the issue of human rights in general. With the protests commencing earlier this year Colombia has unfortunately been in the international eye for gross human rights violations over many years. According to the UN verification mission, 133 human rights defenders were killed in 2020, 117 were killed in 2019, 115 were killed in 2018 and 105 were

killed in 2017. Unfortunately, more human rights defenders are being murdered on an annual basis and those figures are growing. That is a major concern. There needs to be full engagement with the National Commission on Security Guarantees and participating organisations to ensure the definition and implementation of a public policy to dismantle parliamentary successor groups, which must take place. I look forward to hearing the response to that. There is a need for total reform of the police services. People have called for moving responsibility for the police from the ministry of defence to a civilian department, disbanding the anti-riot force and other measures. Can the witnesses advise if there will be any reform of the police services within Colombia?

I also wish to raise the issue of the peace process. Since the commencement of the peace process in Colombia some positive strides have been made but there are areas of serious concern. The implementation of the peace agreement has been slow in many areas and some opposition politicians in Colombia are concerned about the gross underfunding of the process. Human rights organisations and opposition politicians suggest a different picture compared to that portrayed by the Colombian authorities and they single out the areas where slowest progress is being made, which are the chapters focused on the root causes of the armed conflict, namely, the rural issue and land reform. There is also concern about the number of former FARC combatants who have been assassinated to date. It is estimated more than 270 FARC members have been assassinated since the commencement of the peace process in 2016. That is deeply concerning. We need to see the full implementation of peace and renewed efforts by government to bring an end to attacks on former members of FARC and on the peace process in general. There needs to be maximum protection for former members of FARC and increased attention to the legalisation of land titles, provision of land to peasant farmers and measures to provide former FARC combatants with access to land to facilitate development of socioeconomic projects.

I will touch on the prioritisation of the mutually agreed coca substitution. I listened intently to the figures given there but more needs to be done in terms of programmes, financial payments, access to alternative economic projects and an end to the forced eradication programmes in communities where manual substitution has been agreed.

There are many points there but, to sum up, I ask about human rights, the protests and the huge concerns around the peace process.

Chairman: I will revert to the witnesses with a number of wide-ranging questions from Deputy Brady on the current protests, the issues surrounding the negotiations including what is happening and what is likely to happen, the broader issue of the peace process and rule of law and specific issues of land reform and coca growth. Having regard to Mr. Archila Peñalosa's engagement in the negotiations to bring parties to the national strike and the protests together, I turn to him first to deal with the issues raised, and then I will move to the ambassador.

Mr. Emilio José Archila Peñalosa: President Duque's Government regrets all violence. We feel sorrow for people affected by the strike and by protestors who did not behave according to the standards. We feel sorrow and solidarity for people who have been affected by police or other authorities that have abused their power. We are committed to the investigation of all affected people. We feel the same in relation to policemen and public servants that have been attacked. There is no distinction between our commitment to the investigation and the resolution that those actions that were outside the rule of law need to be investigated. All people who have acted outside constitutional and legal standards need to be investigated and, if found guilty, punished.

We are committed to the highest standards of human rights in the regular life of Colombia and, in particular, in the time of protest. We are open with all our attitude to co-operate and facilitate the investigation by all the independent authorities in Colombia. The general attorney's office is an independent branch of the Colombian state, as are the procuraduría and the contraloría. They have been accompanying this process and are doing their job in relation to the people affected. Vice President Marta Lucía Ramírez was in Washington and Ambassador Cortés Ortiz will go into detail on the timing of the visit of the human rights mission. We added that to the presence of the United Nations representative for human rights. We agreed to that and have been acting to have those guarantees for the people who are peacefully protesting.

In accordance with President Duque's instructions, we are hearing the voices of the national strike committee and having regional talks in all areas of Colombia with people who are marching and expressing their opinions. At this moment, we have more than 42 of these dialogues and negotiating processes around the country. I will meet the national strike committee again in a few hours and we have been more than open to their expectations that we enter a negotiation sphere. However, we have said that the blockades of our roads need to come to an end. The blockades of our roads and communication systems have caused a huge amount of sorrow and pain. They have affected all Colombian people. They have affected people in the countryside. They have caused people not to receive medicines and made food and supplies very costly. They are more costly than they would have been if the tax reform was passed. There is no provision in our law, Ireland's law or any country's law to permit protestors to decide who goes through the country or decide which products can pass or not. That has been our demand.

It is not only the Government's demand; it is what the people that marched two days ago asked. There were thousands of people representing millions of Colombians who have been seriously affected by this unlawful practice. I received a letter yesterday from the union that embraces more than 98% of Colombian entrepreneurs requesting that we do not enter the negotiation phase if these blockades do not come to an end.

In regard to the inquiries on the implementation, I will be glad to provide information. We have an English version of the report. I point out that, according to the Kroc Institute, which surveys the advances we have made, it was remarkable what the Duque administration accomplished in the last year, taking into account the restrictions that we have, in particular the pandemic and also the immigrant problem coming from Venezuela. Notwithstanding those restrictions, there has been no limitation of the resources that were assigned to the implementation of the agreement.

In some of the areas to which Deputy Brady referred, we have had the most significant advances in the multipurpose cadaster project that Columbia has seen. It is foreseen that we need to have 3 million ha in 15 years for that land bank and we have provided 1 million in less than 35 months. We need to give title on more or less 1 million ha to people who are in need. We have presented to the Congress and the special jurisdiction a ruling on these issues, which is something the Colombian people have been expecting for a long period.

We have implemented co-ordination between all the agencies that have responsibility for the safety of Columbians so they focus on the protection of ex-combatants. That was analysed by the special jurisdiction and after the one year that it studied, of the 35 special measures that we have for their protection, it made a recommendation in regard to two. It is obviously our goal that no ex-combatants are attacked or killed, and we are working to fully protect them. It is illustrative that, last year, the number of people who were attacked or killed reduced by 10%. If we compare this process with other peace processes that have been implemented in Colombia,

this is the one with fewer casualties per 100 ex-combatants. I emphasise that this is not enough and we are working hard to take that figure to zero.

Chairman: Thank you. I call the ambassador to respond to issues raised by Deputy Brady, with particular reference to the ongoing peace process and the progress or lack of progress, and perhaps to deal with the issue of land reform as posed by Deputy Brady.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: I thank the Chairman, Mr. Archila and Deputy Brady. As I said, I have had previous meetings with the committee and I have tried to provide contextual information, which I think is important. I invite Deputy Brady and all of the members to consider the contextual information on the process, not only one side but the whole reality. Unfortunately, these protests, which have seen more than 10,000 activities and social protests, have been affected by violence. I do not want to add to what Mr. Archila said, but I invite members to take into account that there has been a lot of vandalism and this violence has heavily affected our policemen.

In my recent communications, I shared with the members of the committee the specific words of President Duque, in which he highlights the solidarity with all the victims in Colombia during this protest. I want to highlight this point, so I will repeat what he said and I have shared it with the committee previously. President Duque said that we genuinely and wholeheartedly unite with all the victims of violence and express our solidarity with them. The message is clear. Colombia must unite to overcome the ravages of the pandemic and reject violent acts and unlawful ways.

I have shared with the committee members information on the investigations that are currently ongoing in terms of the public purse, with more than 163 investigations having been opened. Yesterday, I shared with the committee information on one formal complaint about missing persons dealt with by the Fiscalía General, which is our authority. There is a unit search for some 200 people who are missing but where there is not a formal complaint. It has already established where they are through that unit search body, given it is not only a fiscalía but contains other institutions.

It is important that I invite the committee members to keep this in mind. We understand the role of social media and how media outlets may support democracy. It is a reality. However, it is interesting that in supporting democracy and freedom, social media often does not provide the necessary context that needs to be understood when looking at any issue. It is no different anywhere and I have seen it here in Europe sometimes, although not necessarily in Ireland. As I share with the committee members information not only on this moment of the protests but what we are doing, it is important to read that part as well. This is an invitation to all the members.

The same probably applies to the implementation. I remember my first meeting with the committee and we have had virtual meetings, although, unfortunately, we have not always been able to meet personally. We always share not only what we are doing and the level of engagement and commitment but, when we have this conversation, some of the committee members have mentioned how impressive it is what Colombia has done and how difficult it has been for Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement was signed but it took close to ten years for the arms surrender and there has been another ten years or more since then. We understand there might be different contexts. That is why I always highlight that I am happy to be here because the committee members can definitely understand the challenges and understand that it takes a long-term process. In Colombia, we would all love to see everything done in two, three or five years

but what is very clear is the commitment, in particular the commitment of the government.

I want to highlight the presence of Mr. Archila and say how much we are always committed to sharing information with the committee on where we are. I will not add much more. I mention the visit of the current Vice President and Foreign Minister of Colombia, Ms Ramírez, to Washington. She had a very comprehensive visit with members of government, civil society, the US Congress, the US Secretary of State, Mr. Blinken, and Samantha Power, who is of Irish origin. In one of these meetings she met the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, IACHR, and she was very clear in extending an invitation to the IACHR. At present, the institutions in Colombia, including the prosecutor's office, the attorney general's office and the ombudsman's office, have this on the agenda. A delegation has already accepted an invitation to Colombia between 8 and 11 June.

To respond to Deputy Brady, perhaps Colombia is different from many other countries in the region. I do not know whether he has been in the region but Colombia is a very open country. It is always open to having this type of transparency and scrutiny. We also have strong institutions that are working. This is why I always highlight the constructive approach. I guess the committee has experience of what it means.

I want to speak more about the pandemic. It is important to understand the context. We are very heavily economically affected by the pandemic. People are tired of lockdowns. We saw protests here against lockdowns but there was respect and statements in support of the Garda because some protestors had flares and fireworks. People are tired and we see this in Colombia. Of course, it can happen in any country of the world. We are working on this. Mr. Archila Peñalosa took time out of his work to share this with the committee.

Chairman: I hesitate to intervene but I understand Mr. Archila Peñalosa has been called away and I acknowledge his presence. I wish him well in his efforts to ensure national dialogue. In doing so, however, I wish to acknowledge recent very serious reports of an escalation of violence. I echo what Deputy Brady said earlier about disturbing reports of the disproportionate use of force. We acknowledge Mr. Archila Peñalosa's good work and his attempt to bring the parties together. I want to say to the ambassador in the presence of Mr. Archila Peñalosa that the reports furnished by her to the committee are regular and most useful and informative.

I acknowledge the work of our ambassador in Bogota, Alison Milton. This is a fairly new posting on the part of Ireland in Latin America. It also symbolises the Colombian peace process as a priority for us and our willingness to help and assist in any way we can. In recent times, I have to say we are most concerned at the disturbing reports of acts of violence. I thank Mr. Archila Peñalosa for being with us and for dealing with some of Deputy Brady's issues. Perhaps we may have an opportunity to return to him later in the summer.

Mr. Emilio José Archila Peñalosa: I thank the Chair and I reiterate my thanks for Ireland's support. It is of great relevance to us that the committee is fully informed of the political situation and of the details of our progress and the challenges we have in fully implementing a solution. I will be more than willing to attempt communication whenever the committee thinks it is useful. I thank the committee.

Chairman: I am not sure whether the ambassador had concluded her contribution in response to Deputy Brady. If she has, I will move to Senator Craughwell but perhaps the ambassador has further specific comments in response to Deputy Brady's many questions.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: I thank the Chair. We can continue with the next questions and I will be happy to answer them.

Chairman: I reiterate our appreciation for the ambassador's regular contact with the committee.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The ambassador is very welcome and I thank her for addressing the committee and taking the questions we may have. Not unlike part of my country, emerging from a stage of conflict is never easy. The old wounds die hard. As people try to cope with the injustice of the past, there will be many opportunities to fall on the path to full peace and reconciliation.

It is not so much that I have questions for the ambassador as I have things I would like her country to do. My colleague, Deputy Brady, has outlined a number of serious matters of concerns. It is my belief that when these allegations are made, it is vital that the Colombian Government openly and honestly addresses each issue as it arises. The investigation of issues that arise from time to time, particularly in the area of human rights abuses and violence, is extremely important. If the country cannot be certain of an impartial investigation from among its own people, it should bring in international people to investigate human rights abuses or issues where there is some doubt with respect to the violence.

We have the Good Friday Agreement and some people would say we have not come an awful long way since the day we signed it. There are still difficulties and those difficulties will be there for many years to come. I ask that the public of Columbia be made aware of every instance of abuse or violence, and that they are dealt with openly and honestly in the local communities, as well as satisfying the international press and watchers.

I wish Colombia well. I want to see it emerge and become the type of place the ambassador spoke of, where we would want to holiday and engage on a full-time basis. It will never be an easy road for Colombia but as it walks this road, the people of Ireland are with it. As good friends can, we will challenge it from time to time and ask the ambassador to explain issues, such as my colleague, Deputy Brady, has raised this morning. I thank the ambassador for coming before the committee and ask her to pass on my thanks to Mr. Archila Peñalosa who had to leave the meeting.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: I thank Senator Craughwell for his questions. First, I recognise particularly the importance of this session and I will always take the committee's questions very seriously and I am open to share my answers, and in the case I do not have an answer, of course to make sure the Colombian authorities know that.

Second, Colombia is a country that has transformed in recent years. Perhaps Senator Craughwell is looking at one difficult picture at present. We recognise this but the country is completely changing in how we are recovering and the socioeconomic fabric. For example, for the past 20 years we have been working hard to fight poverty. Unfortunately, a week before the strike started there was a report to say that 2.7 million Colombians had gone back into poverty. This is mostly due to the pandemic, even though the Government has been working at double capacity on health, the ICUs and the programmes for the poorest of the poor but the reality is that we have been heavily affected.

I invite the committee to recognise that Colombia is a country that has already transformed its health. Before the pandemic, we were the country in Latin America that was growing the

most. We received nearly 6 million tourists and we were really working well but now the Government understands that the young people are asking for more. There are historical demands, which are fine because we understand that people are in the streets in Colombia and maybe in other countries as well.

That is why, for example, as the national dialogue is going on, the Government of President Duque is already engaging in a specific programme for the youth to provide zero fees to enter third level education and a programme for the poorer young people to access housing, for example. He just launched a housing and work programme because we understand that we have to engage in this dialogue but we are listening to the concerns of the people. They are mostly economic concerns but there are many historic concerns. Unfortunately, in Colombia, like in many Latin American countries, there is inequality but we are not going to solve inequality in one year or in one day. This is something that is an ongoing process so that is why we are working as hard as we can in this agenda of recovering.

On vaccinations, so far we have 10 million people vaccinated in Colombia. We are a country of 50 million so we are ten times the population of Ireland but we are working hard on that. We need full respect for the protests but we must also condemn the violence and I want to reiterate that.

On the investigations, I may have said this already but I want to reiterate that in Colombia there are independent institutions already. Our attorney general's office is not part of the Government. It is an independent institution and it is the only institution that really can account for the violations in that process and of course there will be sanctions. I will give the specific information on the investigations. The investigations are into the alleged misconduct of policemen. There are 163 disciplinary investigations open, including: 77 for abuse; 11 for homicide; 31 for battery; 18 for injury; two for sexual harassment; and 24 for misconduct. The policemen have been very affected. During the protests, there were people injured. We are all Colombians. More than 1,000 civilians and more than 1,000 policemen have been injured. Two policemen were killed as well. That is why we are engaged in this dialogue with the complexities that Mr. Archila mentioned.

Perhaps the timing of this debate is good because it is a great opportunity to hear the members. I have always been open. I do not know if other ambassadors do this but I have asked for meetings with all of the members and I have met some of those who have responded to my request. I have permanent contact with Deputy Brady and the Chairman and I will always be open. As I say, Colombia seeks to provide an example of how open we are to listen to all sides, to talk and to convey the messages we receive because we know how important this dialogue is. Colombia is a country that is transforming and that will move on. It has been resilient and the members will be a part of this success story through engaging with us. Colombia has been a success story. We have faced many challenges, we are facing this one and we are confident that we will move on with the respect for human rights but also with this conscience of stopping all types of violence, not only one side.

On the implementation, Mr. Archila mentioned that it is a long-term commitment for 50 years. It is part of our Constitution and it is a long term commitment. This Government has so much to say about results, which is what one wants in the end. Many people may want more, even perhaps including the members and that is fine but we have to understand the complexities and the long-term investment and commitment as well.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the ambassador. It goes without saying but merits re-

peating that Ireland has been and is a strong supporter of the Colombian peace process and we have given practical expression to that support, as the ambassador will be aware. We remain strong supporters of the Colombian peace process and as the ambassador has said in reverse, we will remain strong friends of Colombia.

Having said that, I share the sentiment that, as friends, it would be unhelpful if we were not open and straight with the ambassador. I share the deep concerns of colleagues about the human rights situation in Colombia. I would argue that Colombia cannot achieve the rule of law by extrajudicial methods and that there must be standards in law enforcement, the judicial process and the penal process. I am heartened to hear the ambassador say that there are approximately 160 individual investigations in process. That is welcome. We would be concerned, however, as a country and based on all of our experience, that Colombia has to maintain the peace process through the rule of law.

Having made that point, I am at a little disadvantage in that I was in transit in the car during some of the ambassador's presentation. I was trying to listen to it and to manage to do some city driving as well so I did not pick up on everything the ambassador initially said. I want to make a further comment that the ambassador's remarks on housing and education were priorities are so crucial. The way Colombia will achieve a real, profound and lasting peace is by addressing the housing and education question.

It is hoped that tourism into Colombia can be restored. It is crucial economically, socially and in every other way. I do not have to remind the witnesses that Colombia's tourism product will be greatly improved by a rigorous addressing and upholding of the rule of law, democratic principles and proper judicial principles.

I would have missed this point so I ask where Colombia is with the pandemic and where the witnesses see the implications of that for the country. The ambassador is not in the Executive wing of the Colombian Government but Colombia's new budgetary requirements are arising from the pandemic. Where is Colombia with vaccinations and caseloads in the context of the pandemic? Where do the witnesses see that going? This is an Executive function but it would seem logical that in the achieving of a budgetary situation to deal with the pandemic, the Colombian Government would try to achieve a level of consensus and societal buy-in to its tax methods, which should help to deal with the demonstrations. We are strong supporters of the Colombian peace process. We firmly believe in it and want it to succeed. We want to visit a prosperous and successful Colombia in future. There is no reason we should not do so. I wish Colombia well in its endeavours in that direction. As friends, we have to strongly make the points we made and it would be negligent of us on a number of fronts not to do so.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the ambassador and Mr. Archila Peñalosa for their time. They are very welcome and it has been a pleasure to hear from them both. Their statements about providing a future for the youth of Colombia in terms of work, housing and education are very positive and I welcome them wholeheartedly.

On the pausing or pushing back of non-Covid medical care because of the demands Covid placed on the health system and health and medical care for women and children, are there plans to conduct an assessment of the impact of Covid on these services across Colombia? Has an assessment been carried out? What are the plans to address this issue?

I will address Mr. Archila Peñalosa's statement on the local elections. In terms of gender equality and female participation in politics, Colombia has done very well at a national level. I

am curious to note that there has not been the same level of progress at a national level. What was the rate of female participation in local elections in terms of the candidature and gender balance of elected representatives?

I refer specifically to an OECD report from 2019 which referred to violence against women candidates and the impact that may have on women seeking a career in politics. The committee has heard substantial reports from various organisations on how countries can emerge from Covid in terms of the societal and political changes that will be needed. Globally, we are now in a place where we need to address the pre-existing disadvantages that women experience in terms of educational attainment, business and economic participation, political representation and activism, both at the national and local levels. I would be grateful if the ambassador would address those points.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: I thank Deputy Clarke and Senator O'Reilly for their questions.

Before addressing the questions related to Covid and the social impact on women when it comes to their participation in local elections, I do not want to miss the opportunity to reiterate that we are a democracy. When we say Colombia is a democratic country, it is not because it is a label but because we know that democracy is based on values, one of which is human rights. We fully believe in that.

On this issue of international scrutiny and transparency, members may not know that Colombia has had a UN office for human rights since 1996. There are more than 20 UN agencies in Colombia working on different areas. I will not mention other countries by name but not many countries would be comfortable with such a presence or with working with these agencies. When we talk about investigations and human rights defenders, the UN office in the Colombia works with the fiscalía in identifying these cases. The institutions are independent and we work fully with the UN agencies. That is why we care so much and are always explaining and listening. We respect the seriousness of the issues driving the protests and guarantee that mobilisations are free and without stigmatisation.

As with all parts of the world, the security forces in Colombia have a role in protecting the rights of citizens. That is in the constitution and they cannot go further than the constitutional law. That is clear.

Colombia has faced the scourge of the drugs problem. Let me tell the members something from my heart. We see huge consumption of drugs in many countries, particularly in Europe. People cannot imagine the level of violence that is behind the consumption of drugs. Perhaps members may know this if they go to areas in Dublin such as Ballyfermot. Behind all of these drugs, there is always violence and the Colombian police have faced that for many years. The police has strict training in human rights. Could it be better? Of course, and it has to be better.

The security forces in Colombia have a constitutional responsibility to guarantee the rights of citizens to participate in demonstrations, which they have done. Their duties and obligations cannot go further than what is in the constitution and in law. I assure members that is the case. That is why I give an update on our investigations every two weeks. The Colombian police force is very legitimate. We are recognised for co-operating with many countries, including in Africa and Central America, for example, in providing training. We are at a difficult moment but I assure members that we are working within the law and the constitution. Any violations that have happened are being investigated and will full sanctions will follow.

I appreciate the question about Covid. As I have said, it has had a serious effect. The first thing the Government of President Duque did was to more than double the capacity of intensive care units, ICUs, and of the health sector in terms of medical doctors. Colombia is a very diverse territory of over 1 million square kilometres, extending from the Caribbean coast to the Andes Mountains and the Amazon. Colombia has 32 departments which are equivalent to Irish counties. In each department, there was a particular supply for ICUs to make sure we had capacity.

Colombia has had one of the longest lockdowns. As a result, many people are tired of the lockdown and the economy has been very heavily affected. The Government of President Duque made sure no one had to make a horrible decision about who could or could not go into an ICU. The Government also ensured the health sector could work by providing support. We were not as generous as Ireland has been with its population but we are providing this support. That was one of the reasons for the tax reforms. We are now having fiscal difficulties so we had to make sure we had enough resources.

I ask members to bear in mind that Colombia has ten times the population of Ireland. We have had more than 3 million cases of Covid whereas there have been approximately 260,000 cases in Ireland. Covid has caused 88,000 deaths in Colombia. We have started vaccinations. Colombia is experiencing a peak of Covid and the strikes have taken place during this peak. Imagine massive protests in Ireland in January this year. I just give that as an example. That is why the death rate has increased. We have been very focused on vaccination and have already vaccinated 10 million people. We have already started vaccinating people of 40 years and older. Our population is not as old as it is here, perhaps, but it is important to keep in mind that we are focusing on this. We are actually vaccinating the teachers because we want to make sure that schools, although open, operate in a flexible way. There is a focus on students and members of the military. With regard to those associated with the peace implementation and reintegrated people, all of the people are being enabled to have access to the vaccine and healthcare. We have been heavily affected, as can be seen from the numbers. Colombia is now the country with the third highest number of cases. This is the kind of ranking a country never wants. We know the reality on the mobilisations but I am not according blame in that regard. I am just stating the reality. We are working hard on how to recover the economy, our main focus being on the social programmes.

On the question on youth and problems with education, we are now making sure that we provide subsidies to companies to make sure they hire staff between 18 and 28 years. On the matter of elections, there is to be an election in November for local, regional and national youth districts. This is new for us. It is to give a greater voice to the youth. This is what we call the pact for youth. There is a very ambitious programme for housing. Historically, Colombia has had very solid policies on housing but now, given that many people are on the streets asking for jobs and more opportunities, we have to be mindful that we cannot just achieve an economic recovery in terms of numbers. It must be in terms of people because this is what we know. We do not just talk about figures or GDP because we have to make sure we listen to the people.

On the impact of Covid on our health system, there was a health reform I wish to mention. The strike committee decided to ask the government to take it out and we did. The reform was to address some of the difficulties. In the cities, 97% of the people have access to healthcare. There is a public system and also a private health system. There are some issues because we have had to invest in more resources over the pandemic to make sure a long journey will be very stable. We are working on that. The Colombian Minister of Health and Social Protection is the

vice president of the COVAX mechanism. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs went to Washington, where one of the first points on the agenda was to ask the US Administration to support us better in terms of vaccinations. Unfortunately, as we see, those who were able to get most of the vaccines got them. The reality, since we are not all vaccinated, is that it is very difficult to talk about a recovering economy. We have a solid plan. With the protests, some of the vaccinations in some areas were affected but we are now on track.

On the question as to whether there is a study on the long-term effect on our health service, we will share what we have with Deputy Clarke. I am not aware that we have a study. Maybe there is one but I am not sure of the information. Knowing the Deputy's interest, I will make sure she gets the information.

Chairman: That is helpful ambassador. I call Deputy Brady.

Deputy John Brady: There are two issues on which I wish to touch in direct response to some of the comments of the ambassador and Mr. Archilla Peñalosa. The first concerns the allusion to the blockage of roads and the destruction of property by some of the protestors. Is the indiscriminate targeting of protestors by the police and other actors a legitimate response to some of the actions of the protestors? To my mind, it was not a legitimate response. Could the ambassador comment on that?

My second point is on the investigations that have been launched. While I fully welcome the commencement of investigations, I note that in 2020 and 2019, there have been many deaths at the hands of police forces targeting protestors. About 13 protestors died at the hands of police as a direct consequence of their direct involvement in protests. There has been total impunity for the perpetrators of these crimes. I ask the ambassador to state what sentences have been handed down to the perpetrators of the crimes. What is being done to ensure there are thorough investigations? Full, thorough and independent investigations are critical.

On the broader issue, on the end of the systematic use of police violence, I asked a specific question on the reform of the police services within Colombia. Maybe the ambassador will touch on those points briefly.

Chairman: We are coming to a conclusion. I ask Ms Cortés Ortiz to deal with Deputy Brady's points. In her opening statement, she said that among the many serious and complex challenges being faced by Colombia, there is the added issue of the refugees from Venezuela. There are in the region of 1.8 million, or almost 2 million. The ambassador might refer to how this has further stretched the Colombian economic response, bearing in mind what she said in response to Deputy Clarke on Covid. We very much acknowledge in Ireland the complex nature of the current circumstances in Colombia. As Senator Reilly and others have said, we speak this afternoon in solidarity, notwithstanding the very serious and urgent issues Colombia is facing.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: I thank the Deputy and the Chairman.

Regarding the blockades, it is so important to hear from the committee the condemnation of all types of violence on all sides. The public force has the duty to protect not only the protestors but also all other Colombians. There have been some dramatic events that I am sure many do not regard as peaceful protests. There was an attempt to burn alive a group of ten police officers by setting fire to a station. There was the burning and looting of an hotel in Cali where police officers were staying. There was an attempted sexual assault of a woman police officer in Cali.

The unfortunate case of Allison has been mentioned. Protestors have set fire to local criminal courts in Tuluá. In those criminal courts, more than 1,000 firearms have been taken by people. I assure Deputy Brady that those are not legitimate, peaceful protests. Having pacific protests with the youth talking and singing are good for us and we are listening but the other matters are criminal actions. Pretending to burn alive a group of ten gardaí is not what we would call a peaceful protest. That is why in those cases, under the constitution, the police have to intervene, because we cannot just let the country burn itself. Under the limits of the law and the constitution, there is no doubt that crime gangs have a role in promoting that cause.

While I do not want to go into it, the context that Colombia will have elections a year from now is important. People in Colombia are saying this and that. It is important to take into account that there will be both elections to congress and general elections. There is no doubt that crime gangs are promoting this cause and anything that weakens the Government may be good for those purposes. I am sure that members agree with me that burning and looting a place is not a pacific protest. This is unfortunate. We have seen the reality with civilians. I reiterate not only that we express solidarity, but also that we want to move on from that with our institutions and the right investigations, listening to the people. That this is what we are doing. Most of the reasons are economic.

In 2019, we had protests in the region. There was a long protest in Chile as well. Thirteen people died. There are currently five sentences from the attorney general. I can send further information about the type of sentences. We have been working on that. Regarding investigations, while I have not yet mentioned it, according to the attorney general's office, 17 civilians associated with the protest have been killed during the protest and two police officers have been killed and we are investigating that.

I want to clarify that there is no systemic abuse by police. We have police who have to act under the constitution. This is what we are doing, with all the limits, scrutiny and transparency. Criminals have taken more than 1,000 firearms from the criminal courts and Fiscalía. The authorities have to be there. That does not mean that we are not having a dialogue but these are criminal activities. The blockades have been bad. I mentioned to members of Sinn Féin last week that two babies died in an ambulance because of a blockade. That is terrible for us. One baby who was supposed to go to a hospital could not get to a hospital because there was a blockade and then died in an ambulance. Imagine being the mother. That is why, as recently as last weekend, there was a protest called a silent protest. Millions of Colombians went on to the main streets of the main cities in Colombia, supporting the role of the police and calling for the end of violence and the end of blockades. This is the type of information that I invite the committee to have.

The police are part of the ministry of defence in Colombia. I remember that the director of the national police mentioned that police themselves presented reforms that I understand are in congress. We have a congress like Ireland has the Oireachtas. Those discussions have to be in the congress. Those reforms cannot be through killing policemen or trying to burn them alive. I appreciate the committee's solidarity with the situation.

I appreciate the Chairman's question and want to move from the historic gesture of Colombia. In this context, we are implementing a peace agreement and moving forward. Of course we are facing a protest. No country in Europe has done what Colombia is doing, receiving 1.8 million migrants and having refugees really integrate. The Irish Government has supported some efforts. A particular NGO called GOAL is working on that. I invite the committee to look at that. Colombia is an example with regard not only to solidarity but also to respect for human

rights. It is a significant challenge for us. How to have solidarity with Venezuelans is a significant challenge for us. In the last five years, we have tried all measures to facilitate refugees. Colombia has a border of more than 2,000 km with Venezuela. Nearly 1 million Venezuelans have had access to healthcare in the Colombian system. Imagine the strain on our resources from that. That is why we wanted to avoid the abuse of migrants' human rights and why we are trying to reintegrate people. Just the process of identification costs us more than \$35 million.

That is why we say we are progressive. We have challenges, as all countries have challenges. We have institutions which are working. We are confident, as President Duque has said, that this opportunity to listen to the people and the youth will make us more resilient and make sure that we move on. Human rights and respect for law are so important for any country. We need to make sure that we are a stable democracy. Nobody wants to see an unstable country. Venezuela is already unstable with no democracy but a dictatorship. Colombia wants to be clear about democracy and human rights.

Chairman: I thank the ambassador. As I do not see any members offering, I will bring matters to a conclusion by once again acknowledging the ambassador's presence and the earlier presence of Mr. Archila Peñalosa. I acknowledge his work and wish him well in ensuring that the national dialogue can get under way. I understand that he has gone straight to a meeting in that regard. I thank the ambassador for keeping in contact with us. Once again, I reiterate the solidarity of Ireland and indeed this committee for the peace process in Colombia, acknowledging the serious social, economic and political challenges that are currently being grappled with. I acknowledge in particular what Ms Cortés Ortiz said about the rule of law and ensuring that every effort is made to reduce tension and to reject the use of violence. If investigations are under way regarding the disproportionate use of force, they should continue to achieve the objective of justice. I trust, having regard to the interest shown in the Colombian peace process and indeed more recent protests and events in Colombia, that there will be further opportunities for this committee to engage with Ms Cortés Ortiz. In the meantime, I welcome the documentation that she has furnished us with from time to time. I suggest that we have another meeting in the early autumn. I thank the ambassador.

H.E. Ms Patricia Cortés Ortiz: I thank the Chairman. I thank the committee again for the invitation and I reiterate my invitation to the Chairman and all members of the committee to visit Colombia when it is possible.

I am sure the committee seeing all the openings, challenges and advances will make for a better understating and identification of more opportunities for all of us.

Chairman: I thank the ambassador.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.21 p.m. and adjourned at 2.24 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 June 2021.