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6 October 2020

Movimiento Ríos Vivos, 11 years of struggle for reparation and protection

Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world for land and environmental human rights defenders. Front Line Defenders identified in its [annual 2019 report](#), that 35% of all killings occurred in Colombia. Over the last five years, Colombia has consistently been the country where Front Line Defenders has recorded the highest number of killings of human rights defenders at a global level, and since the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 to September 2020, Frontline has documented hundreds of killings of human rights defenders. These attacks take place in a context where government officials routinely delegitimise the work of human rights defenders and publicly question their motivation. [Impunity for killings is rampant](#). Defenders of land and the environment work in the shadow of intense violence and are often caught in the middle of protracted disputes between illegal armed actors, drug traffickers, landowners and extractive activities.

According to [specialised impact studies](#), large-scale projects, including hydroelectric projects, have resulted in a multitude of rights violations, including threats, killings, judicial harassment and displacement. Additionally, such projects have caused irreversible damage to local ecosystems, as well as the destruction of local and regional economies focused on agriculture and fishing. Hidroituango, along the Cauca River, the largest hydroelectric project in the history of Colombia, is managed by Sociedad Hidroeléctrica Ituango SA and Empresas Públicas de Medellín EMP. It is the most recent example of the relentless struggle of human rights defenders and communities to conserve ecosystems and their social and economic way of life.

In April 2018, nearing the completion of the dam build, two of the Cauca river diversion tunnels were prematurely blocked with cement. This caused the flooding of more than 4,000 hectares of tropical dry forest and left more than 59,000 people without homes and food security, and affected the right to a dignified life of inhabitants of the municipalities of Buriticá, Liborina, Cauca, Tarazá, Toledo, Briceño, Ltuango, Sabanalarga, Nechí, Valdivia, Peque, Cáceres, Ayapel, San Marcos, Majagual, Guarandá, Achi, San Jacinto and Magangué Frente. On 26 [August 2019](#), the Prosecutor's Office accused the former manager of the Hidroituango company and the former manager of EPM-Ituango – the project management company - of the crime of “contracts without compliance with legal requirements”. The indictment hearing has been delayed multiple times and the case has been transferred from prosecutor to prosecutor.

During the last 11 years of active resistance against the Ituango hydroelectric dam project, six community leaders members of Movimiento Ríos Vivos and more than 30 other leaders and their family members have been [killed](#) within the affected area. These murders continue to go unpunished, and reflect the trend in Colombia of an increase in targeting of human rights defenders, particularly those who dare to defend the land and the environment in territories where there is an environment of acute violence.

Movimiento Ríos Vivos is a social collective of associations and families from the Western North and Bajo-Cauca sub-regions of Antioquia, affected by large-scale mining exploitation and by the Hidroituango hydroelectric mega-plant, as well as other infrastructure works that destroy ecosystems linked to rivers in Colombia. Isabel Cristina Zuleta from Ituango, Antioquia, and co-founder and spokesperson of Movimiento Ríos Vivos has dedicated her life to advocating for the 'the canyoners', those who reside next to the Cauca River, and publicising the impact of the Hidroituango megaproject on people. Since 2012, Zuleta, together with Ríos Vivos other members, have made repeated requests for protection measures for Hidroituango victims. However, to date, neither national, departmental or local governments have complied with resolutions, administrative acts, and even two judicial decisions in favor of Movimiento Ríos Vivos and victims.

The National Protection Unit (UNP) is the state body with the duty to ensure the safety of social leaders. However, there have been significant limitations to it effectively carrying out this role. Despite its broad mandate of providing individual and collective protection, since its inception, the National Protection Unit has mainly only pursued a reactive individual approach, rather than a collective preventive one. This, together with the corruption allegations of selling confidential information and budget embezzlement, severely undermines the effectiveness of the protection body. Movimiento Ríos Vivos has suffered because of these limitations. On 27 July 2018, the Ríos Vivos requested collective and individual protection measures for the leaders of the Movement. Despite the Committee for Risk Assessment and Recommendation of Measures (CERREM) assessing the risk as extraordinary on 2 October 2019, and the National Protection Unit ordering the activation of a collective protection scheme on 19 July 2019, to date, only two of the members of the Ríos Vivos Movement have individual security measures and most of the collective measures have not been implemented.

On 25 September 2020, Front Line Defenders sent a letter to the Colombian authorities, and other interested parties, expressing its concern about the reduction of security measures for human rights defenders and social leaders, an action that is not consistent with the priority that the government says it gives to the UNP. For example, despite numerous threats and a smear campaign faced by Isabel Cristina Zuleta the UNP reduced its security measures for her, withdrawing the support of an armored vehicle. The human rights defenders faces imminent risk as a result of the work she carries out in territories where there is a large presence of illegal armed groups.

Two years after the humanitarian and environmental catastrophe in Hidroituango, Movimiento Ríos Vivos won two rulings before the 75 and 45 Criminal Courts in Bogotá, on behalf of the affected communities. The first ruling granted precautionary measures to the victims of Hidroituango and the second demanded the restoration of fundamental rights, and reparations for damage. However, to date, neither the hiring company Sociedad Hidroeléctrica Ituango SA, the project management company Empresas Públicas de Medellín, nor the Government of Colombia, the Government of Antioquia or the Mayors of the affected area, have complied with these judicial decisions or with regard to protection and security of the members of Movimiento Ríos Vivos.

Front Line Defenders emphasizes that the violations faced by Movimiento Ríos Vivos are not isolated cases, but rather part of a broad strategy of persecution, threats, judicial harassment and murders against environmental human rights defenders in Colombia.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds the Colombian authorities that the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of the human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals.

In this context, we urge the Colombian authorities to respect, uphold and implement each of the administrative and judicial measures in favor of the victims of Hidroituango and in particular of the members of Movimiento Ríos Vivos.

Likewise, we urge the Colombian Government and its National Protection Unit to adopt effective collective protection mechanisms without delay to guarantee the protection of life and the valuable work carried out by human and environmental rights defenders, against all violence, threats, reprisals, discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action resulting from the legitimate exercise of the rights mentioned in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

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