

URGENT ACTION

STOP STIGMATISING CIVIL SOCIETY IN CATATUMBO

On March 3, President Gustavo Petro stated that civil society organizations of Catatumbo are “permeated” and “subordinated” to armed groups. Besides being unjustified and unacceptable, this statement endangers the members of these organizations and legitimizes the violence they, as well as the civilian population of Catatumbo in general, have been enduring since mid-January. Several Colombian human rights organizations have called on the President to retract on these remarks. We urge President Petro to stop making such stigmatizing statements and, instead, be open to dialogue and to the participation of local organizations in the implementation of human rights centered solutions to the Catatumbo crisis.

TAKE ACTION:

- Write a letter to the government official(s) listed. Use the sample letter below as a guide or use your own words.
- [Click here](#) to report your action(s) on **Second UA 5.25**. We share this number with the officials we are trying to persuade.

Gustavo Petro Urrego
Presidente de la República
Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Bogotá
Email: contacto@presidencia.gov.co
Twitter/X: [@petrogustavo](https://twitter.com/petrogustavo)

CC: Colombian Embassy in the United States
Ambassador Daniel García-Peña Jaramillo
1724 Massachusetts Ave, NW,
Washington, DC 20036
Email: eestadosunidos@cancilleria.gov.co

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to express my deep concern about the serious risks to the life, safety, and security of the **civilian population in the Catatumbo region**, particularly human rights defenders and members of local civil society organizations. These individuals and their organizations are especially affected by your statements during the public national cabinet meeting on March 3, in which you claimed that civil society organizations in Catatumbo are “permeated” and “subordinated” to armed groups.

Such words put members of civil society organizations, including human rights defenders, at grave risk in a region that has endured decades of armed conflict, where accusations of collaborating with one faction or another have cost many lives. Your declarations contradict international and national legislation recommending public officials to refrain from making statements stigmatizing human rights defenders, which contributes to further endangering them and affects their valuable work. Your statements also contradict your own Presidential Directive 07 of 2023, instructing the entire Colombian government to support and recognize the work of human rights defenders.

I urge you to retract your statements and refrain from further stigmatizing civil society organizations of Catatumbo. Instead, I ask that you recognize their work and ensure their active participation in implementing measures to overcome the region’s crisis by strengthening the civilian presence of the State, providing long-overdue public services to the people of Catatumbo, and ultimately protecting their human rights.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Located in the north-east of Colombia, the Catatumbo region stretches between the Eastern Andes and the vicinities of Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela. This is a region rich in natural resources, particularly oil, where extreme poverty, high levels of militarization and violence, and the lack of access to health, food, education, water, and housing have created a hostile environment for social leadership and human rights defense activities. The region lacks infrastructure and connection with the rest of Colombia and remains as one of the primary enclaves of coca leaf crops and cocaine production in the country.

Amnesty International has followed the situation of violence against human rights defenders in the region for several years, focusing on the Catatumbo Social Integration Committee (CISCA). Since 2020, Amnesty International has pointed out that CISCA's human rights work has been hindered by two major collective risks factors: [high levels of violence in its area of influence, particularly against those in position of social leadership, and the activities of forced eradication of coca leaf crops](#). By July 2023, Colombian authorities had ceased the coca leaf forced eradication operations, and military activity relatively decreased in the region, but [the long history of militarization and the humanitarian impact of the armed conflict has not allowed for a safe environment for social mobilization and human rights work, considering that armed groups activities continued in neighboring areas](#).

Since mid-January 2025, armed confrontations erupted between the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish) and dissident groups of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish) under the name of General Staff of Blocks and Front (EMBF in Spanish), affecting the civilian population. By February 18, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported approximately 80,000 people affected (including at least 47,000 children and 4,600 Venezuelan refugees), 52,000 of which were forcibly displaced 8,600 remained forcibly confined.

Colombian authorities claim that their priority is protecting the civilian population. Human rights organizations of Catatumbo and at the national level have warned about the risk of a militarized response to this crisis, making calls for President Petro to support and implement structural solutions based on a stronger presence of civilian State institutions, such as the [Social Pact for the Territorial Transformation of Catatumbo](#), which was finally signed in Catatumbo on March 6. However, in a national cabinet meeting broadcasted on national television on March 3 to announce the March 6 event in Catatumbo, President Petro' stigmatized the social organizations of the region saying they are "permeated" and "subordinated" to the armed groups, putting them at high risk.

These remarks by the President, [strongly condemned](#) by Colombia's national human rights platforms, contradicted international recommendations. President Petro even contradicted his own Presidential Directive 07 of December 13, 2023, issued to instruct the entire Colombian government to support and recognize the work of human rights defenders.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Spanish or your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: June 13, 2025

NAME: Civilians in Catatumbo [they / them]

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/urgent-actions/urgent-action-protect-civilians-in-catatumbo-colombia-5-25/>