

The need for lasting peace in Colombia is even greater in these uncertain times

Thank you, Mr President, and thank you to the SRSB for his report and briefing today. And thank you to Mr Santiago for his inspiring and wide-ranging briefing on reintegration. And I very much look forward to the coffee that we've promised. And let me also welcome Foreign Minister Blum here to the Council today.

Mr President, let me start with the COVID-19 pandemic, which is on our minds as we look across the range of Security Council business. And let me start by saying to the Minister that we very much recognise the challenge this crisis poses to Colombia. And it was therefore heartening to hear your government's assurances from the President's "stay at home" message on 24th of March. And since then, the implementation of the peace agreement will continue and to see the measures implemented jointly by the parties to limit the spread of the virus and ensure continued service provision for former combatants. Let me also say that we welcomed the announcement of a unilateral ceasefire by the ELN. The group's fulfillment of this commitment would facilitate efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition, potentially and hopefully, representing a step towards constructive engagement around a lasting peace. And in addition, let me also express appreciation to you, Carlos, and to your team and for all your efforts to continue and adapt your work in the face of the COVID-19 challenge.

Mr President, we've also seen progress on implementation of the peace agreement. The continued rollout of the development programs with a territorial focus demonstrates the Government's commitment to working with local authorities to ensure that implementation reaches conflict affected areas. Similarly, local authorities own incorporation of peace-related considerations into their development plans is encouraging. Furthermore, reintegration of former FARC-EP members continues, including efforts to ensure sustainability of reintegration processes both in and outside the former territorial areas for training and reintegration, and we hope to see further efforts on the outstanding issues of access to land and the needs of women former combatants. And it was heartening to hear from Mr Santiago his on a personal experience in some of these issues and how important and impressive to hear about the adaptability of one community to COVID in creating face masks to help with tackling of the crisis.

Finally, let me welcome the ongoing activity by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, especially to increase in participation of victims in its proceedings. And we hope the pace of its important work can be maintained.

Mr President, however, I should also note some areas of concern which require urgent efforts to build on progress made.

First, as we have mentioned in previous meetings, we are seriously concerned about the continuously rising numbers of killings of human rights defenders and other activists, including women leaders. I think we all remember our visit last year to Colombia and the real concerns over safety that were expressed to us by the community leaders that we met. I think there was an overwhelming takeaway from our visit last year. Now, the launch of the Action Plan of the “Comprehensive Programme that Safeguards for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders” was a positive step toward addressing this issue. We recognise that COVID-19 may necessitate adjustments to the plan, but we urge the Government to be flexible and ensure that the plan soon becomes reality, especially as individuals who rightly stay at home to combat COVID-19 are potentially more easily targeted for attack. Similarly, protection measures for former FARC-EP combatants inside and outside former TATRs should be strengthened, as that population continues to face security issues. I think this is reputational for Colombia.

Second, while we recognise the many challenges involved in implementation, we also note that mechanisms to address many of these challenges already exist. The National Commission on Security Guarantees is one such mechanism, and we encourage its more frequent convening and engagement with civil society. Use of other mechanisms for dialogue between the parties would also ensure that disagreements are constructively addressed and overcome and would send a positive signal to all stakeholders about the parties’ credible commitment.

Finally, the Special Representative’s report emphasises the need to keep communities at the heart of implementation. This means ensuring community participation from process design through to implementation and follow-up – from rural reform and development plans to crop substitution and security. Local authorities, civil society – including women’s organisations – and other community stakeholders, have been most affected by conflict. They are also a source of local knowledge, capacity and commitment. It therefore makes sense for them to be at the centre of efforts secure and sustain peace.

Mr President, let me conclude by saying that in these uncertain times, the United Kingdom recognises the challenges Colombia faces are great. We need to retain this bright spot on our agenda. But this means that the need for lasting and inclusive peace is even greater. And the United Kingdom continues to support the Colombian government in its efforts to achieve this crucial goal.

Thank you very much, Mr President.