

Stop the killing

What is needed is immediate unilateral agreement to stop violence against the civilian population

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This Wednesday, ELN [National Liberation Army] and Government delegates are meeting to prepare for the round of talks to be held in Caracas. They intend to resolve the deadlock created by the ceasefire decree, by establishing various working rules and communication arrangements. Let us hope that the ELN does not delay its response to society's demand for a unilateral cessation of hostilities, pending the result of the talks on a bilateral agreement.

We also know that talks are continuing with the EMC [Central High Command], Segunda Marquetalia and the AGC-Clan del Golfo [The Gulf Clan – Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces], with the complex task of deciding on protocols, forms of communication, checks and problem-solving on the road to putting the bilateral ceasefire into effect. There are many issues and incidents that need to be addressed, including the problem of mutual killings between armed groups and the dictatorship of fear they impose on local communities.

At all these roundtables and meetings, they can talk about ceasefires, truces, bilateral and even multilateral ceasefires, decide on protocols, terms and conditions and resolutions, and all that will be less valuable if there are no immediate unilateral commitments to suspend and condemn all forms of violence against local communities, organisations, leaders and people's dignity and property.

Many of those who have taken up arms to pursue their aims and secure personal gain object to being asked to take unilateral decisions and have adopted the spurious argument that in order to move towards peace and the de-escalation of violence, the magic word is 'bilateral agreement'. When they speak of that bilateral agreement as a truce between them and the Government forces, they place at the centre of any agreement the simultaneous cessation of offensive actions between armed groups and all the regulations, protocols, clauses and paragraphs that will only be achieved by lengthy discussions.

However, the fact that they are concerned with all these processes and paperwork, which of course are important, cannot serve as a pretext for concealing that the most important, urgent and undisputed issue is that all the armed groups who are attacking the civilian population should declare before the country and the world that they have decided to ban the killing of civilians, unarmed persons and non-combatants, to stop displacement and restriction of movement by direct or indirect action, and to ban extortion, kidnapping, disappearance, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, the seizure of family and community property and attacks against boys, girls and adolescents.

Any ceasefire between armed groups and any talks aimed at determining the relevant protocols and putting it into effect must, as a minimum, be based on the assumption that there will be a unilateral and unconditional commitment not to harm the civilian population and to effective self-regulation to ensure compliance.

This demand for unilateral commitments to non-aggression is based on ethical and humanitarian principles and political and social needs. There is no need to invoke the obligations imposed by the rules of International Humanitarian Law because, over and above those rules, stands the right to life and customary humanitarian principles.

But we could also invoke the rules of IHL, in order to demand that society and the Government impose them on the parties to internal conflicts as a minimum requirement. Humanitarian agreements that are partially applicable at certain points are based on that obligation and need to establish the appropriate procedures in order to provide effective guarantees for the civilian population.

In any event, what is essential is that, in a violent environment and in order to pave the way to peace, the fundamental rights of the civilian population should be considered as non-negotiable, be applied immediately and unilaterally, without their acceptance being conditional upon other armed groups doing the same.

This unilateral cessation of hostilities against the local population and unarmed civilians has been demanded by the communities most badly impacted by the war being conducted by the armed groups against each other and by the declining number of confrontations with Government forces.

The Awa people and the Afro-Colombian communities in Nariño are demanding a stop to the attacks, recruitment, restriction of movement and murders, such as those of the two children in Alto Mira on 31 December. Although the so-called dissident fronts say that they are observing a ceasefire, it appears that it only applies to the conflict with Government forces, because they have not stopped killing each other and victimising the local population, as they are doing in Putumayo and Cauca.

The Embera peoples from the entire Pacific region, from El Valle and the Chocó coast have spoken out, demanding an end to the use of armed force to displace them and restrict their movement. There are many voices in the Chocó region that are demanding Humanitarian Agreement Now ! and calling upon the ELN and the AGC Clan del Golfo to stop terrorising the local population. The Barí people have asked the President to take urgent action to remove weapons, coca and all forms of violence from their lands and from Catatumbo. Social organisations in the Cauca Valley, including the CRIC [Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca], the CIMA [Macizo Integration Committee], the ACCOM [Association of Community Councils of Northern Cauca] and the ANUC [National Peasant Association of Colombia], have demanded an end to all violence against their communities and territories as a matter of urgency.

In several regions, local communities are opposing curfews, armed shutdowns, the deployment of mines within their territories and threats against the local populations.

Platforms such as Defendamos la Paz [Defend the Peace] have been spreading the slogan NO MATAR [STOP THE KILLING], calling upon all armed groups to show respect for human life and silence their weapons.

This is the cry of millions of Colombians, who opted for life in the major movements of 2019 and 2021 and in the election campaigns. And the protection of life in all its forms will provide the backbone for Total Peace.

We know that the talks are still in the early stages and that there are signs of a de-escalation in the attacks causing harm to the civilian population. Now, with the bilateral roundtable dialogues in progress, what we need is for illegal armed groups of all kinds to issue an immediate and unconditional unilateral statement condemning any form of violence against communities, organisations, leaders and citizens, and to make public the rules and measures they will apply to stop their members and allies from attacking the civilian population.