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Colombian Victims Demand Ceasefire and Urgency in Peace Process at Cuba

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“We want the peace process to be quick because the more time passes, the more casualties we have,” said Reinel Barbosa, 28, who was injured by an anti-personnel mine.

Barbosa was speaking Wednesday to the press at a conference in the Cuban capital attended by conflict victims, Colombian government representatives and members of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, or FARC.

The victims praised the atmosphere of “respect” and “willingness to listen” shown by attendees, saying: “just by respecting and listening to the victims, one can construct the truth and the road towards peace.”

“In my case, the FARC acknowledged that their actions caused a lot of pain and showed their willingness to ensure that such unfortunate and inhuman incidents do not reoccur”, said Consuelo Gonzalez, a former Colombian legislator who was kidnapped 13 years ago.

Gonzalez, held hostage by the FARC for almost seven years, stood alongside congresswoman Clara Rojas -whose status as a victim was questioned by a FARC member- with whom she was held captive.

“Those of us who were with her make it clear that Clara lived through the tragedy, cruelty and horror of the kidnappings like the rest of us,” she said.

Around 25,000 victims of forced disappearances and 27,000 kidnap victims have received

special representation at the conference.

Regarding the case of those missing - people considered dead but whose bodies have not been found- Gloria Luz Gomez, president of the Association for the Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared, said that the law should not just look for these people and establish responsibility, but also ensure that such horrors are not repeated.

“The damage, the emotional impact of this horror has to be repaired. We are not talking of figures, but the stories behind them,” said Gomez, the sister of a student leader kidnapped and tortured by government agents in 1983.

Teresita Gaviria, the mother of a victim kidnapped by paramilitary forces in Medellin in 1998, said that she was satisfied with the compromise between the two parties to provide all the available data to investigate these crimes.

There was also a place for the victims of displacement, which affects 5.7 million people in the country, with special emphasis on the Afro and indigenous communities.

Esau Lemus, an Afro-descendent from Choco, said he sought guarantees in accessing justice by the two communities, while respecting their “own systems of government and internal regulations.”

The governor of the indigenous Awa people, Gabriel Bisbicuis, said that if the conflict is not ended, 34 indigenous villages will face the risk of “physical and cultural” disappearance as they continue being targeted for their way of life.

“We dream of a Colombia where there is brotherhood, without victimization.... We want to contribute to a lasting peace that will allow us to die of old age,” he declared.

Nine of the 12 victims attending the conference are women and are paying “the highest price” in the conflict which has resulted in five decades of violence with over 6.5 million people being affected, said Fabrizio Hochschild, the U.N. representative in Colombia.

More than half of those affected by forced displacements were women who, in many cases, are also subjected to sexual violence, a crime under-represented in statistical figures as many are afraid to speak out.

“Not to speak of the number of mothers who had to suffer the murder or disappearance of their children”, said the U.N. coordinator.

Hochschild highlighted the “generosity” and “dignity” of the victims who instead of “pointing fingers” are thinking about ways to contribute towards peace.

“Their attitude gives hope for a Colombia without polarization, division and stigmatization. This spirit of humanity can prevail and peace can be reached”, he emphasized.

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