



Press Release – 7 December 2021

Visit of the Colombian Truth Commission to Derry

Between 10 and 11 December the Colombian Truth Commission will be in Derry participating in several events related to the work of the Truth Commission and the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Along with the unveiling of an exhibition of hand-crafted dolls made by members of the Colombian exiled community in the UK, Commissioner Dr Carlos M Beristain of the Truth Commission and Peter Drury Representative of The Colombian Truth Commission in the UK will meet with academics at Ulster University Magee Campus, political representatives, and prominent figures in the Northern Ireland peace process. Dr Beristain will attend these meetings virtually since last minute changes in the COVID situation meant that he had to cancel plans to be in Northern Ireland himself. This is nothing new, during the COVID pandemic the Truth Commission has been obliged to adopt a variety of strategies to reach out to the victims and survivors of Colombia's conflict.

Commissioner Dr Carlos M Beristain stated:

This will be an opportunity to share experiences and for mutual learning. Establishing the Truth and recognizing the Truth of the victims and survivors of human rights violations and breaches of International Humanitarian Law are crucial steps on the path towards bringing conflicting sides together and to end the cycle of violence.

Professor Brandon Hamber, the John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace at Ulster University, noted of the Truth Commission visit:

Colombia is finalising its Truth Commission Report. Northern Ireland is grappling right now with exactly what to put in place to reckon with the past. There is a lot we can share from our different experiences. This is an important opportunity for us to listen, learn, and act to ensure both Northern Ireland and Colombia effectively deal with the past and create sustainable peace.

Speaking of the process of handcrafting textile dolls (*muñecas arpilleras*) an activity undertaken by the organization Conflict Textiles together with the Transitional Justice Institute – University of Ulster, Dr Beristain stated:

The exercise of producing the arpillera dolls is one of many carried out during the process of the Colombian Truth Commission by victims and survivors of human rights violations and serious breaches of International Humanitarian Law as a means to be able to reveal hidden truths about their experiences. These truths have often been concealed for many years by trauma, anger and fear. The arpillera doll-making exercise has sought to allow the makers of

the dolls to project their life experiences into the dolls they have fashioned them with thread and needle.

Conflict Textiles curator Roberta Bacic has noted that:

Through textile language participants engaged in a process of touching, exploring, stitching, and sharing their experience of living in exile due to the Colombian conflict. Doing it against the odds of creating a communal experience via Zoom, we managed closeness, trust building and making a piece of tangible art that captures the power of expressing what is not possible to say in words.

The visit comes in the last few months of the Truth Commission's work. The Commission will launch its final report on 27 June 2022:

The visit provides an opportunity to hear from peace activists, academics and political representatives about the peace process in Northern Ireland, to share and learn from the different experiences. It is also an opportunity to bolster the Commission's International network of support. The Commission requires strong support from the international community to ensure that the recommendations of its final report are fully taken on-board by the Colombian Government.

It is hoped that the report will provide tools for Colombian civil society to demand the changes necessary to consolidate peace and justice in Colombia. International support in the form of backing from governments, parliamentarians, and civil society organizations is essential to support Colombian civil society. Moreover, bearing in mind that a new government takes office in August 2022, strong international support is crucial in providing the new administration with the political space to take the decisive action the report's recommendations will demand.

If you are interested in interviewing the Truth Commission please contact Peter Drury, Representative of the Colombian Truth Commission in the UK – peter.drury@comisiondelaverdad.co Mobile No. 07929 550 504 (please send a text message if no reply). Other participants in the 10-11 December events in Northern Ireland are also available for interview: Professor Brandon Hamber - The John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace, the Transitional Justice Institute, and INCORE; Roberta Bacic – Conflict Textiles; Dr Lina Malagón – Transitional Justice Institute and can be contacted via the University of Ulster press office: pressoffice@ulster.ac.uk

Background Information

Programme for 10 December 2021 in Derry

On 10 December, International Human Rights Day and as part of the Human Rights Festival in Northern Ireland, there will be an event unveiling a banner of handcrafted cloth dolls (*muñecas arpilleras*) made by members of the Colombian exiled community in the United Kingdom in two workshops coordinated by Conflict Textiles, the Transitional Justice Institute – University of Ulster and the Colombian Truth Commission. Two of the doll-makers will be present at the event. The exhibition – “Con-textualizing Memory” (*Con-textualizando la Memoria*) – runs for a month 10

December 2021 to 10 January 2021 and will be held in the Ulster University Library, Magee Building. The unveiling event will take place between 12:00 and 1:00pm.

In the afternoon between 2 and 3:30pm the Commissioner Dr Beristain together with Professor Brandon Hamber, Roberta Bacic – Conflict Textiles, Dr Lauren Dempster, QUB, Professor Siobhan Wills - Director of the Transitional Justice Institute – University of Ulster, Peter Drury – Representative of the Colombian Truth Commission in the UK will be participating in an online seminar focused on the topic of memory and truth in post-conflict societies.

Programme for 11 December 2021 in Derry

Meetings are planned with prominent figures in the Northern Ireland peace process.

Details are still to be confirmed but the Truth Commissioner hopes to meet with several parliamentarians during his visit.

Background Information on the Colombian Truth Commission

The Truth Commission was set up as part of the peace process between the Colombian Government and the FARC guerrilla in 2016. The Commission's mandate runs to 2022 when it will launch a final report. It has three main objectives:

- To promote knowledge and acknowledgement of human rights abuses and violations which took place in the conflict.
- To promote coexistence (Convivencia)
- Promote non-repetition

In line with these objectives, the Truth Commission seeks to uncover the truth surrounding human rights violations and abuses which were carried out during decades of internal conflict in particular to bring to light the collective responsibilities of society in the Colombian human rights crisis, not only the responsibilities of the security forces, paramilitaries and the FARC and other guerrilla groups but also those of political, economic and other sectors.

The Commission is a non-judicial body which works alongside two other bodies set up as part of the peace process: a Special Jurisdiction for Peace (*Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz*) - a judicial body with the authority to impose alternative sentences on combatants who admit to serious crimes or criminal sentences against those considered to be responsible for serious human rights abuses and deemed not to have told the truth; and a Unit for the Search for Disappeared People (*Unidad de búsqueda de personas dadas por desaparecidas*) - a non-judicial body charged with the search of thousands of people disappeared and forcibly disappeared during the course of the internal conflict. The report the Commission will launch on 27 June 2022 is not a judicial document and does not seek to establish individual criminal responsibility in human rights violations, rather it seeks to establish collective responsibilities in these crimes. In exposing these responsibilities, it aims to provide Colombian society with the tools to demand the changes necessary to end impunity and dismantle the structures behind the violence, to help dilute polarization and work towards non-repetition. Ending impunity implies confronting powerful vested interests and as such requires strong governmental commitment to fully implement the recommendations that will be contained in the report. A new administration takes office in Colombia in August 2022, international accompaniment

to the report and its recommendations is crucial to provide the government with the political space and support to carry out the necessary changes.

The Truth Commission has gathered testimonies of victims/witnesses and even perpetrators of these crimes in order to prepare a report that will aim to lay out the patterns of violence that have characterised the conflict. It has sought to secure the testimonies of victims of all parties to the conflict and all sectors of society including Afro-Colombian, Indigenous Peoples, and members of other ethnic groups in Colombia, peasant farmers; human rights defenders, trade union, environmental and other activists, children (including second generation Colombians living outside Colombia), women and members of the LGBTQI+ community. In undertaking this work the Commission has sought to prioritise a gender focus, one that seeks to understand the different ways in which the conflict has impacted on the lives of people. The work is not confined to Colombia but instead the Truth Commission is carrying out work at the international level to secure the testimonies of the Colombian diaspora in many parts of the world including the UK. This is one of the most innovative features of the Colombian Truth Commission in contrast to previous Truth Commissions. There has been a systematic effort to reach the Colombian diaspora around the world. Around 14,000 testimonies have been gathered in Colombia and worldwide. In undertaking this work, the Commission is trying to ensure that exile is recognised as one of the impacts and violations of the conflict.

For many people the chance to tell their story has been a process of breaking a silence imposed by the dynamics and impunity intrinsic to the Colombian conflict. Speaking out to denounce human rights violations and abuses against loved ones, neighbours or colleagues meant facing the same thing happening to you. Impunity reinforced the silence: who is going to believe you? The opportunity to break the silence imposed on victims of human rights violations/abuses it is hoped will, for many people, will be of some help in confronting the experiences they have been forced to internalise. For those in exile it is hoped that an additional layer of silence will be broken that has been created by racist attitudes and the stereotype of treating any Colombian and anything related to Colombia as being linked to drugs.