

Mr. Mark Lowcock
Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator
United Nations
New York, USA

Bogota, 22 January 2021

Re: Colombia – UN OCHA transition and non-appointment of a Humanitarian Coordinator

Dear Mr Lowcock,

As the Humanitarian NGO Forum in Colombia consisting of 25 humanitarian organizations, we would like to express **our surprise and concern regarding the proposed transition of UN OCHA into a Humanitarian Advisory Team (HAT)** and the non-appointment of a Humanitarian Coordinator in Colombia. We are kindly requesting that you reconsider your decision, and calling on the IASC to conduct an operational peer review of Colombia to determine the mechanisms and coordination systems that humanitarian actors need for effective principled action led by a well-functioning HCT.

We strongly believe that the transition of OCHA and non-appointment of an HC in a country currently experiencing the overlap of four different humanitarian crises (conflict, COVID-19, natural disasters, and migration) with an already 2-year gap after the resignation of an RC/HC is ill-advised. Moving forward in this manner would set a dangerous international precedent and not only puts pressure on the UN system, but also on all humanitarian actors at a time in which humanitarian access is shrinking. How the UN reacts now has major implications for the entire international humanitarian community.

The proposed changes undermine the existence of and the response to the multiple humanitarian crises in Colombia. In particular, this decision will diminish the importance of the ongoing armed conflict on civilians and could further put at risk their protection and access to critically needed assistance. Such a decision would also compromise a coordinated humanitarian response based on humanitarian principles, reduce NGO and INGO capacities to respond to humanitarian crises, and further weaken the fragile peace that the country endeavoured to achieve. **OCHA's role remains critical** to generate objective and neutral information, monitor the humanitarian situation and coordinate a humanitarian response based on existing needs.

According to the HNO 2021, **6.7 million people in Colombia are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Colombia**; 1.5 million more than in 2020. The pandemic, continuity of armed conflict, disasters, climate change and continued and unprecedented migration due to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela have increased the number of people with humanitarian needs. Since the signing of the peace

agreement, a further 500,000 people have become newly and forcibly displaced. More than 70,000 people were affected by confinement in 2020 alone.

Last December, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, condemned the increase in violence by non-state armed groups, criminal groups and other armed elements in Colombia against rural population, indigenous people and Afro-Colombians. She urged authorities to take **concrete action to protect the population in an effective manner**. The reconfiguration of armed conflict is evident and is a sensitive issue in Colombia, which divides and polarizes the society; therefore, it must be addressed by a principled humanitarian response.

We acknowledge the progress and achievements made by the Government of Colombia in preventing, protecting and assisting victims of the conflict. Nevertheless, the killing of activists and social leaders, threats and attacks on civilians continue in the country. **Forced recruitment increased in 2020** compared to 2019. The proportion of civilian casualties from anti-personnel mines (MAP) and unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains higher than military ones (62% vs 38% in 2020); total victims from MAP and UXO increased by 49% in 2020.

As humanitarian organizations working in Colombia for decades, we have continuously advocated for a Humanitarian Coordinator in Colombia and the strengthening of OCHA in country, especially in light of the ongoing challenges described above. Given the significance of this moment, the NGO Forum in Colombia respectfully requests that you reconsider your decision and engage with us in a constructive dialogue. **Concretely, we would like to propose a meeting to discuss these points with your team by mid-February.**

We look forward to collaborating with you and your team on how to strengthen the humanitarian coordination needs in Colombia moving forward.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the Forum of Humanitarian NGOs in Colombia (FOHC), Steering Committee members:



Dominika Arseniuk
Country Director
Norwegian Refugee Council



Adriana Franco Chitanana
Country Representative
Lutheran World Federation



José Luis Barreiro
Coordinator
Humanitarian NGO Forum - Colombia