

Torture sites and mass graves reported in Colombia as repression intensifies against mass protests

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A May 23 report prepared by the human rights organization Justicia y Paz stated that fascistic paramilitary groups, which operate in concert with the far-right and US-backed regime of Colombian President Ivan Duque, have created torture sites and mass graves in an attempt to suppress protests in the city of Cali, which has been the epicenter of continuing countrywide demonstrations.

The report described “chop houses” in Ciudad Jardín, a neighborhood of Cali, where protesters kidnapped by fascists were tortured and dismembered. Residents, the document asserts, were generally too frightened to denounce these chilling crimes, for they knew that they had the sanction of the police and the state.

The report went on to describe mass graves, “where the bodies of many young people were taken,” in the cities of Yumbo and Buga. It noted: “The people who have shared their testimony indicated that the youths were detained, some of them have been reported missing by their friends or families, and in Guacari, in Buga, 45 minutes from Cali, they were executed. Some of the survivors of the executions were found with gunshot wounds in health centers and today are terrified and in hiding.”

Thousands of people involved in protests have been arbitrarily detained and often subjected to brutal treatment, sometimes including torture. Of these, hundreds have been “disappeared.” The Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia had reported 548 missing persons as of May 7. In Cali alone, human rights groups reported 206 missing persons as of May 20.

The corpses of murdered protesters have begun to turn up in rivers, some showing signs of torture, others dismembered. In one particularly grisly instance, the

severed head of a missing protester was found in a plastic bag. Other bodies have been found alongside abandoned roadways. Among those murdered was Beatriz Moreno Mosquera, a Buenaventura teacher and syndicalist, whose body was found bearing signs of torture.

Even as it employs such gruesome and outright fascistic methods against the predominantly peaceful protests, the Duque administration is escalating state repression. Duque announced on May 28, which marks a month since the demonstrations began, a “maximum deployment” of the military and police in the western province of Valle del Cauca and its capital Cali. Thirteen demonstrators were killed on that day alone in Cali.

In employing the military and paramilitary forces, including for kidnappings and murder, the Colombian oligarchy is adopting the tactics of the decades-long US-backed counterinsurgency war during which hundreds of thousands of mostly peasants were killed and “disappeared.”

These methods of brute force and terror mark an escalation in the efforts to suppress protests involving millions of youths and workers against social inequality and the homicidal response of the government to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed over 88,000 lives in the country, according to official figures.

Protests began on April 28, triggered by a proposed tax reform which would shift the burden of the pandemic onto poor and working-class Colombians while protecting the wealth of the country’s oligarchy, who form the main constituency of the Duque regime.

Although the tax reform was ultimately withdrawn in the face of the growing unrest, the demonstrations

quickly escalated into a generalized outpouring of anger against corruption, police brutality and the government's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other longstanding social grievances. The protests grew to massive proportions, with as many as 15 million Colombians out of a population of 50 million taking part in demonstrations in one form or another.

According to Human Rights Watch, there have been 63 “credible” reports of deaths since the start of the protests, which is higher than the 45 deaths reported by the Colombian Ministry of Defense. The majority of the dead have been gunned down with live ammunition by the National Police, the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD) and fascistic paramilitary forces who work in concert with the security forces.

Many thousands have been injured. One favored tactic of the security forces has been aiming “nonlethal” projectiles at the faces of protesters, often causing severe injuries, including blindness. The NGO Temblores reports at least 46 protesters with eye mutilations as of May 20.

In addition, at least 22 women have reported being sexually assaulted at the hands of the police. In the city of Popayán, a 17-year-old girl committed suicide after she denounced the ESMAD officials, who had detained her, of sexual assault. This triggered angry protests and the burning down of the local police jail.

The bourgeois press in Colombia has imposed an unofficial blackout on the protests to cover up the crimes of the state. The government has also taken to cutting off power and internet access to targeted areas, allowing their forces to move in and commit atrocities under cover of darkness.

The bloody details of the repression have nevertheless been captured on hundreds of cellphone videos that have been uploaded to social media. One video uploaded to Twitter shows a block of working-class homes going up in flames, apparently after police fired tear gas canisters into the buildings. In another instance, police fired tear gas into a hospital.

The ruling capitalist oligarchy is seeking to defend its wealth and privileges at any cost. The vicious repression meted out by the state, on the one hand, and the desperate anger fueling the protests, on the other, reflect the enormous social tensions that exist within this deeply unequal country, in which 42.5 percent of

the population live below the poverty line.

VICE interviewed a doctor who runs a makeshift clinic in Cali that provides medical aid to protesters wounded by police. In reference to the Cali youths who have formed defensive groups to confront the police, known as the Front Line, he said, “The people putting themselves on the line are the people who have nothing. They feel that since they already have nothing, there’s nothing they can take away from them.”

One of these Front Line youths told *VICE*, “We’re young people who removed our blindfolds and can now see the truth. We’re sick of the lack of opportunity, of the inequality, of this society of rich people that sees us as delinquents because we rebelled and decided to act against this situation.”

The heroic determination of the Colombian workers and youth in the face of deadly state repression stands in stark contrast to the duplicity and cowardice of those claiming to represent them. The major trade unions and the pseudo-left organizations, organized in a “National Strike Committee,” have been involved in talks with the Duque regime in an effort to bring an end to the protests. The Catholic Church and the UN are also involved.

The National Strike Committee’s demands have focused on reformist measures such as the dismantling of the ESMAD, greater opportunities for students and a basic income. This promotion of illusions in half-measures is meant to distract workers from the irreconcilable class conflict that lies at the heart of Colombian capitalism. The Committee has also carefully avoided mobilizing workers in key industries, thereby deliberately isolating the protest movement.

By their actions, the trade unions and the pseudo-left—representing sections of the affluent middle class—whatever their rhetoric, demonstrate that they serve as auxiliaries of the Colombian state in protecting the interests of the oligarchy and its US imperialist sponsors.



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