

Earlier this month a Justice For Colombia delegation of senior politicians and trade union leaders from Northern Ireland travelled to Colombia. The group, including representatives from the DUP, UUP, Sinn Féin, SDLP parties and trade unions spent six days meeting with victims groups, trade unions, politicians from all parties, former FARC hostages, prisoners and hearing testimony from peasant farmers, indigenous and afrocolombians in Cauca region – described as the epicentre of the Colombian conflict.

The group addressed plenary sessions in the Senate and House of Representatives and met with President Santos to discuss the imminent peace process.

The Northern Ireland delegation shared their experiences of their own peace process in different meetings throughout the week, including addressing a seminar attended by members of the congressional peace commission and retired military generals.

The visit was covered intensely by the Colombian media, on television, radio and newspapers.

During their visit, the group released a statement outlining their impressions and making their recommendations for a successful peace process. Below is the full statement issued on their return to Ireland on Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> November:

“We, a group from Northern Ireland of politicians and trade union leaders, representing all sides in our conflict have been in Colombia since 4<sup>th</sup> November on a delegation organised by Justice for Colombia, with the help of members of Colombians for Peace and the congressional peace commission. All of us have played a role in our own peace process.

“We have spent the last five days learning about the Colombian conflict and sharing our experiences from our own peace process.

“We met with President Santos, members of the government negotiating team and we have met politicians from all parties, and addressed plenary sessions of the House of Representatives and the Senate. We had asked to meet with the FARC negotiating team and hope to meet with all negotiators in the future.

“We have met with a diverse array of civil society organisations including the national victims’ movement MOVICE, the mothers of soacha, ASFAMIPAZ and liberated policemen, trade unions, human rights activists, the Catholic Church, Colombians for Peace and the patriotic march movement. We have been impressed by the bravery of the people we have met who continue to work despite the threats and fear they face.

“We witnessed the human rights situation and the effects of the conflict firsthand when we visited northern Cauca department, hearing testimony from peasant farmers, indigenous and afrocolombians. We have seen how civilians are caught in the middle of the conflict. We have also visited prisoners including FARC combatants and human rights defenders.

“Throughout our visit we have been asked to support civil society’s role in the peace process. We believe it is essential that human rights activists, trade unions, social movements like the patriotic march and victims must be able to carry out their work without fear in order to create conditions for a successful inclusive peace process. We support the Colombian people in their search for peace and from our experiences we feel that the following steps may help the peace process:

- In our experience a bilateral ceasefire helped us create a positive atmosphere for the negotiations to take place and helped avoid further civilian suffering. We recognise the challenges this brings but encourage all sides to work towards a cessation of violence as soon as possible.

- In our experience it was essential that once publically announced, the process was transparent at every stage.

- We believe civil society’s participation is key to any peace process.

- We believe that those working for peace such as the patriotic march and Colombians for Peace must be given every guarantee from the state that they will be able to participate in the process and carry out political activity free from persecution, death threats, stigmatisation or imprisonment.

- We have heard from many victims their desire to be included. We still

have some way to go to address victims' needs in our conflict but we believe it is essential in finding true reconciliation.

“Our aim in being here has been to listen to as many sectors of society as possible and share our experiences, both positive and negative, to encourage the Colombian people to achieve a true peace with social justice. 20 years ago we would not have been sitting side by side together. We were confronted militarily and many thought that our peace process would be impossible. We have found peace through mutual respect, tolerance and inclusivity. We wish the Colombian people every success in this process and offer our help to support you along the way.”