

Thirty-nine Colombian social leaders, 7 ex-FARC members murdered so far this year



Bogota, February 12 (RHC)-- The number of social leaders and former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) murdered in Colombia has reached 46 people following the February 8th death of Efren Ospina Velazquez, one of the most recognized community leaders driving the illicit crop substitution program.

Ospina was at his farm in the municipality of Tibu when two hitmen arrived on Saturday night and shot him several times until they killed him. After the murder, they fled on two motorcycles.

According to people in the community, the social leader was part of the National Integral Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS). This program seeks to stop farmers from growing coca and obtain economic aid from the government to start planting other products.

The authorities have not established the causes that motivated others to assassinate the social leader. However, those who have been at the forefront of post-conflict causes such as illicit crop substitution have become targets by paramilitary and criminal groups.

That was the case of social leader Celiar Martinez, who was kidnapped for five months and was rescued by the Army in the rural area of Convencion. He was also working in the coca crop substitution program in the Catatumbo area.

Also in this area, on January 10th, Tulio Cesar Sandoval was murdered in Tibu and ten days later, Fernando Quintero Mena, ex-counselor and president of the community action board of Guasiles, was murdered in the municipality of Convencion.

With Ospina's death, three leaders have been murdered in Catatumbo. North Santander, along with Bolivar and Cauca, continues to be the most affected areas by the assassination of social leaders, without any substantial progress being reported in the subsequent investigations.

So far this year, 39 social leaders and seven members of Farc have been killed, and according to a report from the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz), around 630 social leaders have been killed in Colombia, after the signing of the peace agreement in November 2016.

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