

The FARC's Acknowledgement of Kidnapping: An Important Achievement of the Truth Commission

Following the testimony of Ingrid Betancourt in a Listening Space led by Francisco de Roux, president of the Truth Commission (TC), the former leaders of the FARC-EP decided to publish a letter acknowledging the suffering that they had caused through kidnapping. This is an important achievement of the TC, demonstrating both its effectiveness in attaining the truth and acknowledgements of responsibility, and also its ability to mobilise emotions surrounding reconciliation. This snapshot analyses this recent development as part of the virtuous circle of truth.

The FARC Party's Acknowledgement of Kidnapping

Within the collective consciousness of Colombian society, kidnapping is one of the defining crimes of the country's armed conflict. The FARC-EP kidnapped hundreds of business owners, politicians and members of the armed forces, some of whom were held for over a decade.

On 14 September, the FARC party released a statement acknowledging the kidnappings and asking for forgiveness for these actions. They admitted kidnapping as a "grave error of which we can only be regretful" and that from their victims, "they took away what was most precious: their liberty and their dignity". They expressed a profound sense of shame regarding the particular case of Andrés Felipe Pérez, a young boy who died from cancer whilst awaiting the liberation of his father. Moreover, in the statement, members of the armed forces were included within the scope of victims, rather than being labelled as prisoners of war as on other occasions.

The TC's Listening Space with Ingrid Betancourt

The FARC's statement was in direct response to a Listening Space opened by the Truth Commission on the subject of kidnapping. This was a dialogue between Ingrid Betancourt, the presidential candidate who was kidnapped for over six years, and Francisco de Roux. Betancourt was generous in recognising her victimisers' desire for peace but also demanding with respect to truth and justice. She also reflected on the controversies surrounding the language used in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace's (JEP) procedures, as well as the use of different media platforms to revictimise kidnapping victims.

"I understand that for them, it must be brutal to look at themselves in this post-conflict mirror and realise that what they did was not justified, much less ideologically justified as they claimed. All of the abuses they committed, supposedly as part of war, in this ideological conflict where it was the FARC against the oligarchy. Everything they tried to use to cover up the horror that they were producing, has today fallen away. They haven't even faced their own truth. I believe this is one of the aspects with which we are going to measure the ability that we have here in Colombia to advance towards a real peace and a real reconciliation. In other words, "when will be the moment where they can cry with us?", Betancourt told Father De Roux.



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The FARC Party's Reaction

The FARC party listened to Betancourt's testimony whilst its national leaders gathered for a regular meeting. Without being called upon by the Commission, their victims or any of the cases in the JEP, they publicly acknowledged their actions. Although the FARC-EP's use of kidnapping has never been a secret for Colombian society, it is an important step for former victimisers to recognise the harm caused by their actions and accept that they never should have happened. A public acknowledgement of these actions is also a guarantee to victims and society of ex-combatants' commitment to transitional justice.

In an interview with María Jimena Duzán, Betancourt shared "for me this statement came as a surprise. Beyond its language, which I believe to be very important in that it denotes the internal process, there is also the rational element. For the first time, they have had a reflection of: 'we are asking ourselves and questioning the validity of what we did'. And for me, I think that is very important for what we are living in Colombia". The Commission, in its own statement, highlighted that it was Betancourt's testimony that had moved the FARC to act.

The virtuous circle of truth

The recognition of kidnappings is only the first of many moments of truth to come on behalf of the FARC-EP. On Saturday, 3 October, in a letter directed to the JEP, there was also an acknowledgement of six murders, within these the murders of Álvaro Gómez Hurtado and Jesús Bejarano. Regarding the first case, senator Julián Gallo admitted to journalists to have given the order. Although there are still many details yet to be revealed, this shows a maturity from the former FARC-EP leaders in knowing how to move forward in telling the truth.

Although the Truth Commission has facilitated many spaces, including Truth Encounters, for those responsible to acknowledge their past crimes, this work has not been easy. Now that the FARC have started to accept their collective responsibility, the need remains for other actors, such as those representing the state, the armed forces and the police, to also accept their respective responsibilities.

Embrace Dialogue values the FARC party's public acknowledgement and their request for forgiveness. We call upon other actors in the conflict to contribute to the truth and invite Colombian society to be open to it, and to use the truth as a tool for transformative dialogue to liberate the country from hatred.



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