

Pastor Killed While Leaving His Church, Congregation 'Terrified'

A Colombian pastor was killed as he left his church last week in the northwest of the country, in a region that has been plagued by violence from armed groups, local sources told World Watch Monitor.

Pastor Leider Molina, 24, had just finished preaching in his church in Cauca, Cauca state in northwest Colombia, on Friday, Feb. 9. As he stepped outside, he was hit by five bullets.

Molina was known as a passionate preacher and an active youth leader working for his church and city, 670 km north of the capital Bogota, the source said.

The Cauca region has suffered an escalation in violence for the last four months, according to the source. Armed groups fight for control of drug trafficking routes and the ownership of illicit crops.

"Communist guerrillas, paramilitary groups, criminal gangs and drug cartels all see the church as an enemy to be eradicated because, thanks to the preaching and courageous action of leaders and pastors, many young people have renounced armed conflict and illegal activities," the source said.

Last September, two other pastors in the region were killed. Pastor Galarza, a social and religious leader, was shot death in front of his family.

And, as World Watch Monitor reported, Pastor Elfren Martinez Perez, 55, was murdered outside his home after he refused to help members of a neo-paramilitary group with transport.

The church in the area is terrified, according to the source. "Some Christians have fled with their families, while others have decided to stay awaiting the government intervention. Church leaders, however, continue their work despite the death threats," said the source.

Despite the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the country's largest armed group, the FARC, killings have not stopped.

"The peace process with FARC has stalled," said Rossana Ramirez, an analyst with Open Doors International's World Watch Research unit.

"In the coming months, it is likely that priests, pastors and church communities will continue to experience pressure and violence 'as normal.'"

Colombia, although a majority-Christian country, is 47th on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. {eoa}

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