

OPINION

On the Edge of the Abyss

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights confronts the worst financial crisis in its history

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I write with deep sadness, frustration and indignation. We at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights are confronting the worst financial crisis in history. Our coffers are completely empty. If this doesn't radically change very soon, it will not only mean that we will lose 40% of our personnel on July 31. It will also have immediate effects on our work in fighting for human rights in the region: we will not be able to carry out visits to those countries that we must monitor, we will not be able to hold public hearings where human rights problems are presented nor group meetings to coordinate urgent protection measures for at-risk persons. We are on the edge of collapse like never before.

In my career as a human rights defender, I have personally seen how, thanks to the Commission, there has been progress in the access to truth, justice, and reparations, how the lives of at-risk people have been saved thanks to the Commission's intervention. I do not exaggerate when I say that this crisis is a tragedy for this continent.

On July 31, we will lose 30 people who work passionately and are committed to the defense of human rights, some of whom have worked for a decade. 180 employees work at the People's Defender of Costa Rica (la Defensoría de los Habitantes de Costa Rica). The National Human Rights Commission of Mexico (la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos de México) has more than 1000. On August 1, the IACHR could be left with a staff of 48 employees in charge of protecting the human rights of the billion people that inhabit this continent.

For years the IACHR has survived thanks to the voluntary contributions of the United States, Canada, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Norway, the United Kingdom, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the European Union. But this year when we went to knock on doors in Europe in search of financial assistance, we were met with a different response. Europe is receiving a large amount of refugees and this has caused a shift in its priorities for international assistance.

But that's not all. The truth is that we could not respond when they asked us why States in the Americas do not look after their own human rights system. We weren't able to answer them because we were ashamed to speak the truth: Latin America and the Caribbean do not look after their own human rights system. The States created this system in 1959 and declared in the American Convention that the ideal of the free human being, free of fear and poverty, could only be reached by guaranteeing the exercise of her human rights. The States created the IACHR to make this ideal a reality. But afterwards, they never gave us the resources to realize this task.

The Council of Europe allocates 41.5% of its budget to human rights, while the Organization of American States allocates 9.1% to finance the IACHR and the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. The IACHR receives less than 5 million dollars a year from the OAS, or 50 cents on the dollar for every one thousand people. We have fewer attorneys than the number of countries we assist. How can we fulfill our mandate in this manner?

We have resorted to donations to complement our meager income. We have asked member countries, appealing to their responsibility to finance the system that they themselves created. In 2015, Latin American and Caribbean nations donated 13.7 million dollars to the International Criminal Court (ICC), but only allocated 199,000 dollars to the IACHR. And what's worth clarification: there is not even a single case being processed at the ICC, and only one situation under preliminary examination.

The message seems clear. Some countries feel uncomfortable when the IACHR highlights the challenges that the region confronts in the area of human rights. That is our role, assigned to us by the States. But these States are strangling us financially, perhaps so that we cannot fulfill our mandate.

But the IACHR cannot stop. We must continue to be vigilant in the investigation into the murder of Berta Cáceres in Honduras, and of so many other murdered defenders. We must protect the defenders that live under threat, harassment, and criminalization. We must be sure that there is justice for those 43 students in Ayotzinapa, after the Expert Group created by the IACHR revealed the serious errors in the investigation concerning their disappearance, and for so many thousands of other disappeared people in Mexico. We must keep insisting on the closure of Guantanamo, and we must protect the migrants and refugees that flee violence in the Northern Triangle countries, and the unaccompanied children that cross the border looking to be reunited with their parents. We must continue safeguarding the right of indigenous peoples to live in peace in their ancestral lands, the right of women to live free of violence and discrimination, for social justice, in order to put an end to discrimination, whether it be racial, on account of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. Our commitment to our mandate remains firm.

We will always be grateful to Europe for the support it has provided us over these last years. But now the moment of truth has arrived. Either the heads of State in Latin America and the Caribbean make the political decision to breathe life into the inter-American system for the protection and promotion of human rights, or we will be witnesses to the system's collapse.

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