

**PRESS RELEASE**

**Paris, 24 October 2024**

**The International Caravana of Jurists to Colombia 2024**

The UIA Institute for the Rule of Law (UIA-IROL) took part in the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Caravana of Jurists to Colombia, which ran from 19 to 28 August 2024. Canadian criminal lawyer Antoine Grondin Couture represented UIA -IROL on this mission of observation and solidarity.

Composed of jurists from 9 different countries, the Caravana met with lawyers and human rights defenders in four departments of Colombia (Valle del Cauca, Bolivar, Magdalena and Norte de Santander).

The main objectives of the Caravana were to highlight the risks faced by lawyers, human rights defenders and the communities they defend; to engage in dialogue with the Colombian authorities on this subject; and to raise international awareness of the issues surrounding access to justice in Colombia.

A group of jurists coordinated by Mr. Grondin Couture travelled to Catatumbo (Department of Norte de Santander), one of the regions most afflicted by the armed conflict. The trip provided an opportunity to observe first-hand the phenomenon of organized armed violence targeting peasant and indigenous communities in Catatumbo, as well as the human rights defenders who support them.

The visit was also an opportunity to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the La Gabarra massacre, in which dozens of people were murdered by paramilitary groups in 1999. In this border zone with Venezuela, neglected by the Colombian state and where impunity is omnipresent, UIA-IROL takes note of the courage of the lawyers who fight for access to justice for the victims of international crimes.

Following rich exchanges and numerous interviews, the Caravana's mission is now turning to a process of reflection and the drafting of a report in which UIA-IROL will participate. Some clear findings have already emerged from the Caravana's work:

- Although the nature of human rights violations varies greatly from one region of Colombia to another, what lawyers in each of the regions have in common is that they are regularly targeted by attacks from armed groups.
- These attacks take various forms: threats, assassinations, forced disappearances, forced displacements, sexual violence, criminalization, etc.
- In Colombia, any form of social organization, whether peasant, trade union, environmental or associative, entails its share of risks. The mere exercise of the profession of lawyer, human rights defender or social leader is likely to expose those who practice it to serious attacks.

As has been the case for previous editions of the Caravana, UIA-IROL is committed to following up the Caravana's work with the communities and institutions with which dialogue has been initiated. These include the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Justice, and the *Fiscalía General de la Nación*, the national institution in charge of criminal prosecutions.

#### **More about UIA-IROL**

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*The Institute for the Rule of Law of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA-IROL) promotes the Rule of Law and supports and defends, in particular, (1) lawyers, judges and human rights defenders who are harassed, threatened and/or persecuted in the exercise of their professions, (2) the independence of the legal and judicial professions, and (3) the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, especially in defense of human rights.*

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For more information go to: [www.uianet.org](http://www.uianet.org) - [uiacentre@uianet.org](mailto:uiacentre@uianet.org)  
**Contact person:** Julie ROSA, Communications Manager [jrosa@uianet.org](mailto:jrosa@uianet.org)