

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500
cc: Secretary of State Rice, Colombian Ambassador Barco, and members of Congress

Dear President Bush,

It is with deep concern that we, as leaders and members of U.S. congregations and faith-based organizations, call upon you to commit to a serious reassessment of current U.S. policy toward Colombia.

Since 1985, an estimated 3.6 million Colombians have been deliberately and violently forced from their homes. The country's population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is second only to Sudan's, and Colombia's humanitarian crisis is the worst in the hemisphere. Threats, assassinations and other acts of violence against civilians continue to be committed regularly by leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and Colombian security forces (1).

Churches, religious leaders, and peace communities have often been caught in the crossfire of the violence. Whole congregations have been displaced, churches forced to close, and priests and pastors killed as they have worked to provide sanctuary and humanitarian assistance to victims of the violence, encouraged dialogue, and initiated programs of development and peace. Their initiatives represent real hope for a lasting and sustainable peace. We are concerned that President Uribe and representatives of his Administration have not spoken out strongly enough against threats and attacks against human rights defenders and community and religious leaders. The United States should insist that threats be fully investigated and prosecuted, and that the Colombian government make clear pronouncements about the value and legitimacy of human rights work in a democratic society.

The lack of progress with the paramilitary demobilization process is also troublesome. Although the U.S. requires that Colombia have "concrete and workable" plans for dismantling paramilitary structures as a condition for receiving U.S. aid, the Colombian government has offered no such plans. In fact, credible sources indicate that at least 43 groups of ex-paramilitary combatants have re-armed. The demobilized soldiers are receiving far more attention from the Colombian government than the internally displaced and other victims of their violence. Moreover, we see disturbing signs of impunity for the perpetrators of gross human rights violations.

Many of our organizations work closely with churches and civil society representatives in Colombia in their efforts to build peace and protect the victims of Colombia's ongoing internal conflict. In their recent national Week for Peace many of these organizations jointly called upon their own government to:

- Support a humanitarian accord and respect the civilian population caught in the

crossfire;

- Guarantee the safe return of those forcibly displaced along with their land titles and indemnification in a condition that safeguards truth, justice and reparation;
- Support a campaign against hunger and poverty and increase long-term social investment;
- Recognize and support the peace communities, their leaders and the processes designed to empower citizen participation;
- Support a politically negotiated solution to overcome the conflict.

Currently over 80 percent of U.S. assistance each year goes to the Colombian military and police, while less than 20 percent supports economic and social development. We want to stress that a strategy of military aid and fumigation, with only limited social investment in local communities, will not result in lasting change, or create the conditions for a sustainable peace in Colombia.

We urge the United States government to:

- Prioritize funding for humanitarian aid for internally displaced persons and refugees;
- Reduce military assistance and increase aid for sustainable development;
- Urge improvements in human rights by applying tougher standards for State Department certification of U.S. aid to Colombia;
- Encourage the Colombian government to pursue an end to violent conflict through negotiated peace processes that include civil society participation;
- Insist that the Colombian Government follow through on its stated commitment to dismantle the paramilitary structures, and seriously address victims' rights to "truth, justice, and reparations."

We as people of faith appeal to you, Mr. President, to take steps to change U.S.-Colombia policy in order to address our concerns and build a true and lasting peace with justice in Colombia.

(1) Extensive U.S. military aid over the last five years has not resulted in improvements in the Colombian military's human rights record; indeed, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has cited increased extrajudicial executions of civilians by members of the military in recent years.

Sincerely,

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