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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3902

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Help Protect Human Rights Groups in Colombia

Dear Colleague:

I would like to invite you to join me in signing a letter concerning politically-motivated burglaries at human rights organizations in Colombia—one of which is staffed by United States citizens. In the first three weeks of June, the Colombian offices of the U.S.-based Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action, Justapaz, and Corporación Yira Castro were targeted by unknown perpetrators who stole computers from each office containing extremely sensitive information that could be used to harm witnesses in human rights cases.

I encourage you to join me in requesting that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe—who has reiterated his commitment to human rights during two recent visits to Washington—address this matter vigorously. If you would like more information on this matter or wish to sign on to the letter to President Uribe, please contact Kirtley Fisher in my office at 5-2735 or kirtley.fisher@mail.house.gov by July 10th.

Sincerely,



Jim Langevin
Member of Congress

July __, 2007

The Honorable Alvaro Uribe Velez
President
Republic of Colombia
Palacio de Nariño
Carrera 8 No. 7-26
Bogotá, Colombia

Dear President Uribe,

We write today to express our deep concern regarding what appear to be politically-motivated burglaries targeting human rights and peace organizations. We recognize the many difficult challenges you face in strengthening the rule of law in your country during an ongoing conflict and were encouraged after your recent visit to Washington, D.C., where you reiterated your commitment to human rights. In light of your stance, we are taking this opportunity to call on your government to act on these serious allegations.

These attacks, highlighted in the U.S. Department of State's 2006 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, appear to be part of a pattern targeting information that could be used to harm individuals, organizations and churches working for peace, defending human rights and helping victims of the armed conflict. Human rights experts indicate that actors in the conflict—paramilitaries, guerrilla groups and allegedly even some members of the government security forces—seek personal information about human rights defenders, witnesses in human rights cases and political opponents in order to carry out acts of violence against them. Therefore, we are deeply concerned for the safety of the staff of the targeted organizations, their local partners and those who were identified in the stolen information.

Since the beginning of this year alone there have been four high-profile attacks in which computers containing extremely sensitive information were stolen from human rights and peace organizations. In January, there was a break-in at the Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace in which a key computer was stolen—the second such attack against this organization in recent years. On June 2, thieves broke into the office of Fellowship of Reconciliation, an organization staffed by United States citizens. They stole the two main office computers, both of which contained key organizational documents, and left items of value that were in clear view. On June 14, unknown perpetrators burglarized the office of the Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action, Justapaz, and stole two computers that contained sensitive information on the organization's programs dealing with human rights abuses and peace-building initiatives. The most recent break-in on June 21 was at Corporación Yira Castro, another human rights organization, where five CPU units, a laptop computer and a video camera—all containing sensitive human rights information—were allegedly stolen.

Given the seriousness of these attacks and the heightened risk that they imply for human rights defenders, peace leaders, religious communities and victims, we respectfully ask that high-level officials of your government make a public statement reiterating your commitment to a swift investigation and prosecution of these cases. We encourage you to reject this pattern of attacks and publicly express support for organizations and churches working to defend human rights, further peace and provide accompaniment for victims would help to deter future attacks while providing a level of protection to those who are at risk due to these incidents. We also recommend that the Colombian judicial system conduct a swift and thorough investigation to bring the guilty parties to justice, as we were concerned to learn that in recent burglaries, investigators failed to retrieve physical evidence that could have been a key building block in a case. We will look forward to updates on the progress of these cases.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter and your expeditious action in response to these burglaries.

Sincerely,