

John J. DeGiogia
President
Georgetown University
204 Healy Hall, NW
Washington, DC 20057

October 8, 2010

Dear President DeGiogia,

It is with the utmost respect and consideration that we write to you today to express our deep concern about Georgetown University's decision to appoint former President of Colombia Alvaro Uribe Velez as a guest lecturer and Distinguished Scholar in the Practice of Global Leadership. We are members of U.S. human rights, development and religious organizations, as well as academics and activists, who have worked for years in solidarity with Colombians in their pursuit for peace, justice, respect for human rights and rule of law. As such, we follow the humanitarian and human rights situation in that country closely.

Our main concern is that a former president with such a negative human rights track record is receiving a position of honor at your university. While Mr. Uribe is credited for having improved security in Colombia, this was done at a great human rights price. His controversial democratic security policies led to grave abuses on the part of the Colombian armed forces and the involuntary involvement of countless civilians in the armed conflict. At present, there are 3,000 cases of extrajudicial executions committed by Colombian soldiers registered in the civilian justice system. These are cases in which Colombian soldiers deliberately took civilians, killed them and then presented them as guerillas killed in combat. Mr. Uribe's tremendous pressure on his armed forces to show "results" led to these systematic violations that escalated dramatically during his two terms in office. Worse yet, President Uribe put lawyers and human rights organizations, who valiantly tried to remedy this situation and seek justice for the victims, at risk by publicly and repeatedly saying that those who defend the victims of such crimes are linked to the FARC guerrillas. The Bogotá-based Jesuit research center CINEP is one of the main organizations that have provided extensive documentation on human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions.

Under President Uribe's tenure, the Administrative Security Agency (DAS), the intelligence agency that reports to the President, was involved in illegal surveillance and sabotage of activities of key human rights groups, journalists, Supreme Court justices, opposition politicians, Afro-Colombian leaders, and trade unions. According to the DAS's own documents that came to light after the Attorney General raided their offices, a sub-unit within the DAS called the G-3 was tasked to "neutralize and restrict" the legitimate work of human rights groups and Uribe administration critics. The G-3 went so far as to intimidate and obstruct the work of its targets. The DAS documents suggest that they plant agents in opposition rallies to "create chaos," disguised themselves as journalists, and planted false information in the press, among other actions intended to

disrupt or discredit civil society activities. It was also revealed that DAS may have been behind some of the most worrisome threats committed against defenders. An example of this was when a bloodied doll was mailed to a prominent human rights lawyer that contained a death threat against her young daughter. It has come to light that part of the G-3's purpose was to fabricate ties between DAS targets and illegal armed groups so that baseless prosecutions could be brought against them.

Another scandal which broke during Mr. Uribe's tenure was that of links between politicians, mostly Uribe supporters, and the right wing paramilitary group the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, considered a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States. The AUC committed some of the worst human rights atrocities in recent Colombian history. One of the methods they employed to exert control over populations was to utilize chainsaws to dismember persons. It is reported that an estimated thirty percent of the Colombian Congress had links to the AUC. Judicial authorities opened investigations for or arrested over 170 Colombian "para-politicians" elected officials were placed under arrest or investigation by judicial authorities for allegations of ties to paramilitaries. Rather than support the actions of members of the judiciary in seeking to investigate parapoliticians, Mr. Uribe attacked them publicly.

While it must be noted that Mr. Uribe initiated the demobilization process of the AUC and that we support demobilization efforts, this particular process was highly flawed. Through this process the government offered paramilitaries short jail sentences in exchange for their full confessions and reparations of victims. While over 31,000 paramilitaries demobilized, it was not until June 2010 that sentences were handed out to a few of these paramilitaries and little land has been returned. Many victims who struggled for their rights to their lands and reparations have been killed. As the AUC paramilitaries were beginning to give information about the crimes they committed and their links to politicians, President Uribe decided to extradite them to the United States. In 2008, President Uribe extradited the top eight commanders of the AUC, a move which has led to adverse consequences to the rights of thousands of victims to truth, justice and reparations. Also, it has greatly diminished Colombia's judicial authorities' ability to move forward on human rights and corruption cases, in particular cases regarding parapoliticians.

Colombia contains one of the largest total populations of displaced persons in the world, second only to the Sudan. While internal displacement is not a phenomenon that started under President Uribe, an estimated 2.4 million persons were displaced during his administration. Also throughout his administration, the government agency tasked with addressing this problem, Social Action, consistently downplayed the scale of this humanitarian crisis, and failed to register some of the displaced. Further, Uribe himself promoted the notion that an internal armed conflict no longer existed in Colombia, rather that the sole problem the country was experiencing was one of terrorism. These false notions led many across the world to turn their attention away from the humanitarian crisis facing this nation and the need for international pressure to promote a politically negotiated end to the war.

During Mr. Uribe's terms, his administration fervently advocated for a free trade agreement with the United States. While his administration had every right to promote such an agreement it did so in a disingenuous manner by discrediting legitimate human rights and labor concerns presented by U.S. and Colombia advocates. The U.S. Congress suspended movement forward towards an FTA because Colombia contains one of the worst records in the world on labor rights violations. Colombia tops the world's list for murders of trade unionists. The Uribe Administration encouraged the expansion of a labor model called "associative cooperatives," in which workers lose their right to organize and form trade unions. This model has led to a severe deterioration of labor protections and a decrease in wages in sectors such as the oil palm, sugar, and port industries.

Under Uribe's tenure, laws such as the forestry law, rural development statute, and changes in the mining code were passed that seriously undermine Afro-Colombian and indigenous rights. Two of these laws were later rendered unconstitutional by Colombia's Constitutional Court since they did not respect the right of ethnic minorities to be previously consulted on economic development projects implemented in their territories. The severity of the humanitarian, human rights and socio-economic crisis facing Afrodescendants in Colombia led to international pressure led to President Uribe appointed Afro-Colombians in high-level posts, a Presidential Commission for Afro-Colombians was created, and the former Vice President recognizing that racism existed in the country. While those are symbolic steps, President's Uribe's policies including those of democratic security, pushing for the expansion of biofuel projects including oil palm cultivation and the anti-narcotics aerial fumigation program seriously undermined the human rights and territorial rights of ethnic minorities. During Uribe's tenure, many Afro-Colombian and Indigenous leaders were killed and/or threatened; these groups experienced multiple displacements and his government undertook no serious steps to protect these communities' leadership and land rights. In 2009, Amnesty International counted 114 members of indigenous communities murdered, which suggests that the government was not implementing the prevention plans ordered by the country's Constitutional Court. On March 15, 2008 in the Communitarian Council of the city of Popayán, according to the ONIC President Alvaro Uribe publicly offered rewards for the heads of indigenous leaders who demanded their just and legitimate rights to their lands.

Mr. Uribe showed an open contempt for human rights defenders and critics by making public statements that linked such persons to the guerrillas. Such statements were often followed by death threats, abductions and killings. Below you will find some statements made by him:

"Human rights cannot be used as an excuse to protect terrorists...the well-known Lawyers Collective Jose Alvear Restrepo cannot use the subject of human rights as an excuse for giving cover to terrorists..."

"Every time a security policy to defeat terrorism appears in Colombia, when the terrorists begin to feel weak, they immediately send their spokespeople to talk about human rights. These human-rights traffickers must take off their masks, appear with their political ideas and drop this cowardice of hiding them behind human rights."

“I am very worried that the guerrilla’s political friends, who live here constantly posing as political enemies of yankee imperialism, frequently travel to the U.S. to discredit the Colombian government for two purposes: the purpose of keeping the Free Trade Agreement from being approved, and the purpose of suspending aid....(These are) friends of the guerillas, politicians who want the guerrillas to triumph in Colombia, but lack the authenticity to call for it openly.”

On March 20, 2005, shortly after Colombian soldiers in collusion with paramilitaries allegedly brutally assassinated eight members of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartadó, including women and children, and the surviving community was at high risk of further harm, Mr. Uribe stated:

“In this community of San Jose de Apartadó there are good people but some of their leaders, supported and defenders are seriously indetified, by persons that reside there, as being auxiliaries of the FARC and who want to use that community to protect that terrorist organization.”

To those who have lost loved ones to abuses with the direct involvement or collaboration of government forces under the Uribe administration, and to the Colombian organizations that struggle for justice, these honors bestowed upon former President Uribe are a painful reminder of an unjust world. Given the above, we believe that a prestigious university like Georgetown, whose foundations are in Jesuit principles, should carefully examine whether it is acceptable to have a person with such a track record receiving a position of honor.

Sincerely,

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