

John Sullivan  
Deputy Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Deputy Secretary of State Sullivan,

We write with great urgency to express concern about the accelerating rate of murders of social leaders and human rights defenders in Colombia. We respectfully call upon you to ensure that the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development and all other related U.S. departments and agencies are actively engaged – in word, deed and resources – in bringing the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. We further call upon you to protect these national and local leaders, their families and communities, and ensure that these attacks do not undermine or debilitate the implementation of Colombia's historic peace accords. We emphasize that this human rights priority is essential to the national security and economic interests of both the United States and Colombia.

Colombian human rights defenders and social leaders have increasingly been targeted for assassination. According to data from the Colombia Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHRO), attacks against human rights defenders in Colombia have increased by thirty percent over the past year. In its 2017 report, UNHRO-Colombia reported 121 killings, whose fatalities included 84 human rights defenders with leadership roles, 23 members of social and political movements, and 14 people killed during social protests. Colombia's Human Rights Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo) recorded between January 2016 and the end of February 2018 a total of 282 murders of social leaders and human rights defenders in the country, including 22 during the first two months of 2018. During the first two and a half months of 2018, the Colombian human rights group, Somos Defensores, cited 27 killings.

This means that a Colombian social leader is murdered every two and a half days. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) expressed its concern over the high number of murders of human rights defenders and social leaders registered this year in Colombia and urged the Colombian government to take urgent measures to protect human rights defenders and social leaders. For your background, we are including with this letter examples of some of these murders since March 1<sup>st</sup>.

As you know from your recent visit to the region, Colombia will soon hold a presidential election, and it is implementing a complex peace accord that ended more than 52 years of conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Between the 1970s and the 2000s, thousands of political party candidates, rural leaders, labor organizers and other social leaders were murdered. The peace accord is predicated on the idea that all Colombian citizens can participate in politics and social projects without fear of violence or being killed.

It is vital that Colombia demonstrate that activists and competing political actors can engage safely in political and social discourse. If targeted murders continue unabated, they will likely contribute to increased violence. That would be a blow to U.S. economic, trade and national security interests in Colombia and Latin America, and a major setback to decades of U.S. investments to strengthen Colombian civil society and judicial systems and promote respect for basic human rights.

For these reasons, the recent explosion in attacks and killings of social leaders is of utmost concern. Many local leaders who lived for years in territory under guerrilla control have now begun to raise their voices. Ominously, they face efforts to silence and terrorize them. Whether coordinated or not, these attacks are happening throughout the country. Among the individuals and groups who appear to be most targeted are:

- People denouncing human rights abuses or acts of corruption in their communities.
- Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders seeking to assert their communities' cultural, collective land and property rights.
- Participants in non-violent progressive and grassroots political movements, whose physical integrity and right of participation are guaranteed by the peace accord.
- Land rights advocates, small farmers and families trying to recover land that was stolen or violently usurped by illegal armed groups during the conflict. In many cases those targeting them are the current occupants of that land, or the locally prominent and politically connected individuals for whom they serve as stand-ins and who use illegal armed groups or hired assassins to carry out their bidding.
- Leaders of "Community Action Boards," local advisory councils established by a 1960s law. Violent groups and local bosses often view these Boards as a threat to their authority.
- People and campesino association members participating in crop substitution programs mandated by the peace accord to help communities stop growing coca, which is central to advancing anti-narcotics efforts and generating alternatives to the illegal coca economy. In effect, they are being killed for their support of government crop substitution and rural reform policies.

According to the UNHRO and credible Colombian and international human rights organizations, the masterminds and perpetrators of these killings represent a specific group of actors: paramilitary or organized crime groups; smaller guerrilla groups like the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN); remnants of former guerrilla organizations that resisted demobilization; those who control or benefit from local drug trafficking, illegal mining, extortion and other illegal activities; and large landowners and regional special interests who use violence against political rivals, small farmers they seek to dispossess of land, and independent leaders and social organizations in order to maintain their authority and control.

In the past, Colombian authorities have shown that when it is important to them to lower the number of such killings, they are capable of doing so. And, while physical protection is important

for those facing the highest known level of risks, it is expensive and impractical to provide it for every individual under threat.

We strongly believe protection mechanisms must be combined with other decisive action. First and most importantly is to swiftly bring to justice those who plan and orchestrate these murders, and not just the “triggermen” who execute the killings. Second, is for Colombian authorities at all levels to send clear, public and consistent messages that perpetrators, collaborators and beneficiaries of these crimes will face consequences. Third, is to dismantle illegal and violent armed actors that continue to murder and attack social leaders and the economic structures that support them. Fourth, is for the Colombian authorities to establish security and provide state resources and a functioning presence in regions vacated by the FARC guerrillas, as required by the peace accords. And fifth, is for Colombia to achieve a complete peace by advancing the Quito peace process with the ELN, understanding that successful negotiations require good faith and the commitment to end violence and conflict on the part of the ELN.

We strongly urge the State Department and USAID to provide the resources and necessary support for Colombia to achieve these objectives, including pressing the current Colombian government and its successor to make these actions a priority. Congress has provided ample funds in FY 2018 for Colombia for these purposes and others. This should include more vigorous support for and insistence on results by the special units and mechanisms within the Attorney General’s Office and those mandated by the peace accords to address paramilitary violence and the dismantling of criminal and other violent structures. It should also include continued support and more demonstrated results on the ground from the Department of Labor’s International Labor Affairs Bureau (ILAB), which has advanced labor rights and protections; and the State Department’s Race, Ethnicity and Social Inclusion Unit (RESIU) and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), which play an integral role in assessing the ongoing labor, human rights and civil rights challenges confronting Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities.

More specifically, we urge the State Department and USAID to provide more resources for investigations, prosecutions and protection and to guarantee full compliance with the U.S. conditions on military assistance to Colombia. This should include increased support to the UNHRO-Colombia, the Human rights Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo), the Inspector General (Procuraduría), the Interior Ministry’s National Protection Unit, and the Attorney General’s Office (Fiscalía General) in the form of technology, technical support, aid for administrative salaries and logistical expenses so they can increase their coverage throughout the country. It is especially important that within the Attorney General’s Office that the Special Unit to Dismantle Organized Crime and Paramilitary Successor Groups and the Human Rights Unit demonstrate concrete results.

The State Department and USAID should direct and coordinate with other U.S. departments and agencies, including the Defense Department, to prioritize ending the murders of social

leaders and human rights defenders so that the U.S. Government speaks with one voice and is publicly seen by all sectors inside Colombia to be engaged on all fronts to address this priority.

The U.S. might also determine how best it can support and advance the elite corps of National Police, formed by the peace accord, the unit which has been responsible for most arrests so far of alleged material authors or “triggermen.”

Finally, when the National Commission for Security Guarantees, also created by the peace accord, develops its action plan to address paramilitary networks responsible for many of these killings, the State Department and USAID should determine how best to support the Commission, Colombian authorities, and civil society in achieving the plan’s objectives.

People getting away with murder must know that there are and will be consequences to their actions. It is critical for Colombia to demonstrate that it is a country where one can freely and openly engage in non-violent political and social action without the risk of assassination.

Please know that we stand ready to work with you to advance these measures and achieve these goals as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,  
Members of Congress