

Letter signed by over 100 civil society leaders and well-known personalities in Colombia, including the leaders of many of the country's human rights, victims and peace-building organizations, the director of the Colombian Conference of Catholic Bishops' Social Ministry, the national indigenous association ONIC, national and regional women's associations, a former national peace commissioner, the two civil society representatives to the National Commission for Reconciliation and Reparations (CNRR), academic advisors to the CNRR's historical memory project, artistic associations, and Catholic and Protestant church leaders.

February 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
Washington, DC  
United States of America

Dear President Obama,

First, we take this opportunity to congratulate you on your recent election. In Colombia, as in most countries of the world, the people have received your inauguration as President of the United States with great optimism. We believe that your message of hope and commitment to the values associated with civil and political liberties, and to the norms and institutions of government under the rule of law, is the true path to strengthen democracy and global security.

We, the undersigned, are members of Colombian civil society and are engaged in efforts to defend and uphold human rights, strengthen democracy, and bring peace to Colombia. We believe that the solution to the internal armed conflict that afflicts Colombia – the only one that persists in the Western Hemisphere – requires a negotiated political solution. We consider the cooperation of your government to be important in such an effort. Ending the Colombian armed conflict would have not only obvious and positive benefits for Colombia, but would also contribute to the political stability of the Andean region and efforts to control the threats posed by illegal activity in the hemisphere. With these expectations in mind, last December 2 a group of Colombian and U.S. citizens met in Washington under the auspices of the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Colombia Human Rights Committee to discuss possible paths to pave the way to peace in Colombia.

In this context, we would like to take this opportunity to suggest proposed changes to U.S. policy towards Colombia to help attain this objective:

1. Rework anti-drug policy, because it has proven ineffective for controlling drug production and consumption and these activities' devastating impacts. Drug policy needs to acknowledge the principle of shared responsibility between producer and consumer countries in facing this scourge. Plan Colombia, until now focused on the failed strategy of aerial spraying of illicit crops, needs to be overhauled so as to accord priority instead to interdiction and voluntary eradication in coordination with communities, and productive alternatives for the peasant farmers who depend on these crops, as well as rural reforms that protect land rights and provide meaningful reparations to those displaced by violence and drug trafficking. In this context, it is essential that the United

States continue increasing the percentage of social and humanitarian assistance versus military assistance in the aid package.

2. Help create the conditions for a peaceful and negotiated solution to the internal armed conflict and support humanitarian actions for the sake of protecting lives and victims' rights. Given that the armed actors are able to take advantage of drug trafficking to grow and finance their activities, we are convinced that ending the internal armed conflict will bolster the effectiveness of counternarcotics efforts.
3. Support the judicial branch in Colombia, especially the Office of the Attorney General (Fiscalía General), judges, and the Supreme Court of Justice, as well as oversight agencies such as the Inspector General and the Ombudsman's offices, so as to ensure an end to impunity for the actors in the armed conflict and their allies, and to conclude the investigations into the so-called 'parapolítica' or 'parapolitics' scandal, which has involved the capture of the Colombian State by armed political mafias and drug-traffickers, who pose a risk to democracy in Colombia. As you have stated, we believe that a person "living in fear of violence doesn't care if they're threatened by a right-wing paramilitary or a left-wing terrorist; they don't care if they're being threatened by a drug cartel or a corrupt police force." To achieve these goals, it is important that there be judicial cooperation to investigate money laundering and ensure prompt and comprehensive justice for the crimes against humanity committed by the Colombians extradited to the United States, so as to comply with the rights of victims to truth, justice, and reparations.
4. Accord priority to human rights as the foundation for U.S. policy and aid, using the framework of the United Nations recommendations. Despite gains in security, serious and systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law – including forced displacement, forced disappearance, targeted assassinations, kidnapping and extrajudicial executions – persist to this day.
5. Enter into a mutually beneficial fair trade agreement, based on respect for human rights and sustainable development, ensuring not only the life and rights of trade union leaders, but also equitable treatment for ethnic minorities, women, peasant farmers, and Colombian producers, to encourage just economic development, including land tenure policy, that does not exacerbate the armed conflict.

We trust that your presidency, which has created great expectations around the world, will make it possible to build a more just and democratic world order that is respected by all. We firmly believe that the respectful suggestions that we propose will contribute to peace, justice, and development for Colombia, and we hope to keep open a permanent channel of communication that will allow us to implement them.

We wish you the best of success for your government.