

February 25, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

You have challenged us to take up the considerable challenges facing the nation, and to make genuine change in how the United States relates to the rest of the world.

In Colombia, a real change in policy begins by recognizing that the military approach to drug trafficking of the last eight years has been an abject failure, and a new one is needed. This approach, called Plan Colombia, aimed to cut production of coca leaves in half, to affect the price and availability of cocaine in our communities, and ultimately to reduce cocaine use and the social problems it generates. To this end, the United States has spent more than \$6 billion since 2000, nearly 80% of it on the Colombian armed forces.

By all of these measures, the plan has been a waste of resources. Cocaine entering the United States is as cheap as it was eight years ago, and in some places it is cheaper and easier to obtain. Aerial fumigation has wreaked environmental havoc and damaged the health and food crops of poor Colombian peasants, while the total amount of coca leaf grown has remained steady, suggesting that Plan Colombia has little to do with any price fluctuations.

More than three quarters of US assistance in Colombia is focused on failed drug eradication, but promoters say that the plan has also resulted in a drop in kidnappings by guerrillas, fewer massacres, and the demobilization of 30,000 paramilitary fighters. Yet security for millions of Colombians has been devastated. Since Plan Colombia began, more than 2.5 million ordinary Colombians have had to flee their homes because of the violence, constituting the largest humanitarian crisis in the hemisphere. A disproportionate number of internal displaced people are Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples whose identities are at risk of extinction. And the tearing of internally displaced people from their communities continues unabated, with more than 270,000 fleeing in the first six months of 2008. For those families, this is not a war on terror, but terror itself.

Both sides in Colombia's armed conflict have committed terrible atrocities. The armed forces supported by Plan Colombia have the worst record of human rights abuses in the Americas, and civilian killings by the army – nearly half of them by US-supported units – have increased in the last two years. For these reasons, the United States should not arm either side in an unending war in which the great majority who suffer are civilians.

Last May, you said, "the person living in fear of violence doesn't care if they're threatened by a right-wing paramilitary or a left-wing terrorist...by a drug cartel or a corrupt police force. They just care that ... their families can't live and work in peace." We share this insight. For us, and we think for you, it does matter whether people are threatened by corrupt and brutal armed forces that our tax dollars have trained and equipped. We want that to stop.

It doesn't have to be this way. Our nation can encourage a long-sought peace in Colombia, if we are willing to use our resources for diplomacy to support a negotiated peace. While billions flow to war in Colombia, health programs for treating drug addiction and the larger economy here at home suffer from a deep social deficit. More than 23 million Americans need treatment for alcohol or substance abuse. Among substance abusers who feel a need for treatment and are ready to stop using, more than half cannot afford the cost of treatment. The current economic crisis will make the situation for these people and their families even worse, unless we act.

For these reasons, we urge you to:

\* Rethink the failed "war on drugs" in Colombia. Instead of spending billions in a failed "supply-side" strategy that funds human rights abuses, destroys the environment and fuels a decades-long armed conflict, the United States should terminate military aid for the Colombian army. Begin by suspending all US assistance for aerial fumigation and military training.

\* Support a negotiated end to Colombia's armed conflict, using US diplomatic efforts.

\* Invest in real alternative development abroad and drug prevention and treatment at home. Assistance in Colombia should include much more humanitarian aid to the country's millions of internally displaced people, administered by independent agencies not tied to the military, and support for justice for the war's victims. The federal government must fully fund Substance Abuse Block Grants, and include treatment for addiction in comprehensive health care reform. Such treatment will ultimately reduce spending on emergency room and criminal justice costs caused by untreated addiction.

We believe this nation needs a change in its failed policy toward Colombia. This requires deep re-examination of how funds are spent and what the results have been where it matters most – for the most vulnerable and the victims of violence. We look forward to working with you and the Congress to achieve these goals.

Sincerely,

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