

# **Support Human Rights Defenders in Colombia**

## ***Recent Spike in Murders, Threats and Attacks***

March 25, 2008

Dear Colleague,

We invite you to join us on an urgent appeal to Colombian President Álvaro Uribe expressing grave concern over the recent increase in murders, threats and attacks against human rights defenders, trade unionists, and community-based leaders in Colombia. While threats have been on the rise, a series of assassinations, physical attacks, and attempted kidnappings have taken place following public statements by a presidential advisor describing these organizations and their leaders as members of the FARC guerrillas.

The recent spike in attacks, threats and murders prompted the Colombia Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights to issue a public statement of “profound concern” (attached), which calls on the Colombian government to protect these groups from further threat and to undertake decisive investigation and prosecution of those responsible for such acts.

Given the urgent nature of this appeal, the deadline to sign onto the letter is **COB, Thursday, April 10<sup>th</sup>**. To sign onto the letter, please contact Cindy Buhl at 5-6101 (McGovern) or Megan Garcia at 5-2111 (Schakowsky).

Sincerely,

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

Janice D. Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

Dear President Uribe:

We wish to convey our grave concern regarding threats and attacks against human rights defenders preceding and following the March 6, 2008 nationwide rally against paramilitary and other forms of violence. We urge you to take a firm and public stance in support of those who promote and protect human rights.

We are troubled that your adviser, José Obdulio Gaviria, asserted very publicly on Caracol Radio on February 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> that demonstrations organized by human rights organization on March 6<sup>th</sup> were convened at the behest of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). He also suggested that Iván Cepeda and other advocates of victims’ rights were affiliated with the FARC. His statements are not only inaccurate but dangerous, and we urge you to clearly distance your government from these remarks.

We want to associate ourselves with the statement issued on March 13<sup>th</sup> by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – Colombia Office expressing profound concern about the current spike in threats and murders against human rights defenders. In that statement

the UNHCHR calls upon your government to guarantee prompt and effective protection of human rights defenders and leaders of grassroots organizations; and for the Attorney General's Office (*la Fiscalía*) to undertake a decisive investigation into these events. We also support the UNHCHR in emphasizing the enormous significance, especially in the present circumstances, for the highest representatives of your government to express publicly their support for "all persons and organizations that legitimately call for the fulfillment of their rights to truth, justice, reparation and the guarantees of non-repetition."

Since Mr. Gaviria's statements were made, there have been a number of threats and assassinations of civil society and community leaders. These include:

- A shooting on February 28<sup>th</sup> against the home of **Ms. Luz Adriana González**, member of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights and an organizer of the March 6<sup>th</sup> demonstration in Pereira;
- The murder of **Edgar José Molina**, a Huipaz coordinator, on February 23<sup>rd</sup> in Algeciras, Huila;
- The murder of **Leonidas Gómez**, an employee of Citibank and leader of the National Bank Employees Union (UNEB) and the Workers Central Union (CUT), on March 5<sup>th</sup> in Bogotá;
- The murder of **Carlos Burbano**, leader of the national Association of Hospital and Clinic Workers (ANTHOC), whose body appeared on March 11<sup>th</sup> in San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá;
- The murder of **Carmen Cecilia Carvajal**, member of the North Santander Teachers Association (ASINORT);
- The murder of **Gildardo Antonio Gómez Alzate**, delegate of the Association of Instructors of Antioquia (ADIDA) and member of the Center for Teacher Research and Study (CEID); and
- A series of physical attacks and attempted kidnappings against other human rights activists and the theft of computer equipment from the offices of the Association of Displaced Persons of Guaviare (ASPODEGUA), the National Coordination of Displaced Persons (CND), and the National Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives (FENACOA).

While these attacks focused on participants reportedly involved in the March 6<sup>th</sup> national demonstrations, Mr. Gaviria's remarks also contribute to the threatening climate in which the physical safety and work of a broad spectrum of human rights defenders, trade unionists and civic leaders have been put at risk. Human rights organizations that have received email threats since Mr. Gaviria's statements include the Association for Social Alternative Promotion (MINGA), the Corporation for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (REINICIAR), the Colombian Commission of Jurists, the CUT, the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), leaders of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVIC), the national Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), the Center for Investigation and Popular Education (CINEP), and the international organization Peace Brigades International/Colombia Project (PBI). These email threats were sent by groups calling themselves the Black Eagles, the latest of which declares human rights organizations and named human rights defenders to be "*military targets.*" We recall that in November a Medellín delegate of the OAS Mission of Support for the Peace Process (MAPP-OEA), which has been monitoring the demobilization and activities of paramilitary groups, also received a similar death threat. These threats highlight the

climate of intimidation that surrounds the work of both Colombian and international organizations. They also underline the fact that paramilitary organizations still function in Colombia and that the paramilitary demobilization process has thus far failed to adequately dismantle their structures.

We welcome your February 15<sup>th</sup> Presidential Communication to guarantee the rights of those who participated in the March 6<sup>th</sup> protest. Regrettably, even after this pronouncement was issued, Mr. Gaviria continued to undermine the march's sponsoring organizations: in the February 17<sup>th</sup> edition of *El Tiempo*, Mr. Gaviria suggested that they were somehow FARC guerrilla sympathizers; and then again on March 20<sup>th</sup>, when Mr. Cepeda, director of MOVICE, made a formal petition to have Mr. Gaviria dismissed for his comments, Mr. Gaviria made a public statement to the media that "petitions made by the FARC are always considered by the Government and that is precisely what we are doing with this right to petition." Mr. Cepeda rightly expressed his distress that such statements, especially following the recent murders of four trade unionists, put his life in danger.

Mr. President, we believe stronger, repeated endorsement by you and the highest officials of your government on the rights of victims to denounce paramilitary violence and call for justice would help change the climate in which these threats and attacks continue to take place.

We respectfully ask that you personally reiterate the prohibition on public servants making disparaging remarks about human rights defenders enshrined in the 1999 Presidential Directive 07 and the 2001 Presidential Directive 07, and ensure that these measures are fully complied with by government officials. We also ask that you ensure a prompt and effective investigation into all of the above-noted threats, murders and other incidents. Most importantly, those who committed these crimes must be prosecuted. And finally, we urge you to publicly reject the statements made by Mr. Gaviria and reaffirm your government's commitment to the protection of human rights defenders.

Sincerely,  
Members of Congress