

April 10, 2008

The Honourable Maxime Bernier
Minister of Foreign Affairs
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0G2

Dear Minister Bernier:

On behalf of the Americas Policy Group (APG), a working group of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), we are writing to bring your attention to our concerns following a recent increase in threats and attacks against NGOs, unions and human rights defenders in Colombia and to seek action on the part of the Canadian government in defense of human rights.

A large number of organizations and individuals who either helped to convene or who participated in rallies in Colombia on March 6, in commemoration of the victims of paramilitary as well as other forms of violence, have subsequently been targeted. The UNHCHR issued a press release on March 13 calling on Colombian State authorities to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders and leaders of grass roots social organizations. The UNHCHR also urged Colombia's office of the Attorney General to promptly begin an investigation into these events.

In March 2008, five unionists were assassinated. Amongst those killed, was a local leader who helped to organize the March 6 events, and others whose unions participated in the events. Three of these unionists showed signs of having been tortured, in similar ways, revealing that these were deliberate, systematic acts.

During the week following the March 6 events, email threats were received by several NGOs, including MINGA, Colombian Commission of Jurists, CODHES, the National Victims' Movement, CINEP, ONIC, and Peace Brigades International, many of who are long-term partners of Canadian international development organizations. One threat received on March 11 specifically named and labeled twenty-eight human rights defenders as "guerillas" and threatened to kill them. Most threats were signed by an author who identified himself as belonging to the "Black Eagles", (Para-military group). Staff of some local convening organizations have subsequently been kidnapped and beaten, and some offices have reported files and computers stolen.

To date only one person has been apprehended in connection to this string of violent acts; a woman was briefly detained after delivering pamphlets with death threats on them, however, she was subsequently released uncharged.

We are gravely concerned by the way in which Jose Obdulio Gaviria, an advisor to President Uribe, jeopardized the safety of human rights defenders, when he wrongly claimed on radio that the March 6 rallies were being convened by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). He went further to state that Ivan Cepeda, spokesperson for the National Victims Movement, (MOVICE) was FARC affiliated. Two days later, the official web page of the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, (AUC), echoed these statements. Such claims are extremely dangerous and routinely used to intimidate.

Presidential Directive 7 of 1999 and Presidential Directive 7 of 2001 order public servants "to abstain from questioning the legitimacy of... NGOs and their members... and to abstain from making false imputations or accusations that compromise their security, honor and good name..."

Directive 7 of 1999 further clarifies that public servants must not "make affirmations that disqualify, harass or incite harassment of said organizations... [nor] emit ... declarations that stigmatize the work of these organizations."

Colombia has the responsibility to protect the lives, and human rights of all citizens, and to defend the important role of civil society organizations in a democracy.

We believe that these latest incidents are symptomatic of broader disturbing trends that human rights groups have witnessed over the year. This latest string of attacks by armed paramilitary groups raises serious questions about the efficacy of Colombia's Democratic Security Policy, the current demobilization process, and the political agenda of paramilitary groups such as the Black Eagles. Violence against unionists and human rights defenders in Colombia is not a problem of the past, nor is this part of a pattern of "generalized crime" in the country.

In light of the most recent attacks, we urge Canada to:

1. Raise our concerns at these human rights violations and call on the Colombian government to provide protection to those threatened.
2. Call on the Colombian government to ensure a prompt, impartial and comprehensive investigation into each threat and killing; and ensure that those responsible are prosecuted; thereby sending a strong message that they will end impunity and provide protection to trade unionists and human rights defenders specifically.
3. Call on the Colombian government to comply with the recommendations of the UNHCHR report (2004) to apply disciplinary measures against public servants whose declarations, actions or omissions endanger human rights defenders.

Sincerely,

Gerry Barr
President-CEO

Marlen Mondaca
APG Co-Chair

c.c. Mr. Bob Rae, Foreign Affairs Critic, Liberal Party of Canada
Mme Francine Lalonde, Foreign Affairs Critic, Bloc Quebecois
Mr. Paul Dewar, Foreign Affairs Critic, New Democratic Party
Mr. Mathew Levin, Ambassador of Canada to Colombia