

JOINT STATEMENT: AI and CCIC

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Public Statement

Signing free trade pact with Colombia presents grave human rights concerns

On November 21, 2008 Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe signed a free trade agreement between their two countries. If the agreement receives the necessary domestic approval in both countries it will then enter into force sixty days later.

Amnesty International and Canadian Council for International Co-operation are deeply concerned that the free trade agreement between Canada and Colombia has been signed without regard for the widespread and very serious human rights violations that continue to be the daily reality in Colombia.

Most recently, these have included:

- Use of excessive force by state security forces against a mobilization of Indigenous people expressing opposition to free trade agreements and other policies they believe impact negatively on their rights
- Threats and attacks against land rights activists, particularly in areas of economic interest.
- Increase this year in threats and attacks on trade unionists; more than 40 have been killed so far this year.
- Increase in extrajudicial executions by state security forces of civilians, later presented as guerrillas killed in combat.
- Repeated public statements by President Uribe and other senior officials demonizing trade unions (such as striking sugar workers), Indigenous organizations and other groups that are speaking out about violations of human rights, suggesting links with guerrillas. Such statements have led to threats and violence, including killings. Following the release of critical reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in October, President Uribe publicly accused AI of "fanaticism" and "dogmatism" and the Americas Director of Human Rights Watch of being a "supporter" and an "accomplice" of FARC guerrillas. President Uribe has also demonized members of the Supreme Court investigating links between politicians from the ruling coalition and paramilitaries.
- Ongoing and extensive links between state security forces and paramilitary death squads which continue to operate despite government claims to have successfully demobilized them.
- Ongoing failure to bring the perpetrators of human rights violations to justice; despite several high profile prosecutions, justice remains the exception and impunity the norm, giving a green light to those who abuse human rights.

Going ahead with the Canada Colombia free trade deal without meaningful action to address these concerns risks making the human rights situation much worse.

Earlier this year in a study of the proposed Canada/Colombia trade deal, the House of Commons Standing Committee on International Trade called on the government to ensure that an independent human rights impact assessment be carried out and that the results of that assessment be dealt with before the free trade deal is signed, ratified or implemented.

Amnesty International and Canadian Council for International Co-operation are gravely concerned that Prime Minister Harper has ignored this recommendation and decided to proceed without due diligence with regard to human rights. It is vital that the Government of Canada proceed no further towards implementation until an independent human rights impact assessment is carried out and the resulting concerns addressed.

Representatives of our organizations are available to offer an assessment of the human rights situation in Colombia, and to highlight our very serious concerns about moving ahead with the free trade agreement at this time.

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