

March 26, 2008

S.E. Álvaro Uribe Vélez
Presidente de la República
Cra. 8 #7-26
Palacio de Nariño
Bogotá
Colombia

Dear President Uribe:

We write to express our deep concern about the recent wave of threats, attacks and killings of human rights defenders and trade unionists in connection with the March 6 demonstrations against state and paramilitary human rights violations. We urge you to publicly and immediately adopt effective measures to stop this violence.

Over the course of one week, between March 4 and March 11, four trade unionists, some of whom were reportedly associated with the March 6 demonstration, were killed (see footnote). Members of human rights organizations have also been subject to a large number of physical attacks and harassment. Their offices have also been broken into and equipment and files have been stolen.

In recent weeks a large number of human rights organizations, including la Asociación MINGA, the Colombian Commission of Jurists, Reiniciar, CODHES, the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE), and Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres have received threats purportedly coming from the Black Eagles. One threat sent by email on March 11 specifically named twenty-eight human rights defenders. The threat, which was signed by the paramilitary group “Metropolitan Front of the Black Eagles in Bogotá,” accused the individuals of being guerrillas, referred explicitly to the March 6 demonstrations and stated that they would be killed promptly. The next day, another paramilitary email threat to various other groups announced a “total rearmament of paramilitary forces.” In addition to national human rights groups, the threats have targeted the international organization Peace Brigades International Colombia Project (PBI), the news magazine *Semana*, the Workers Central Union (CUT), indigenous organizations, and opposition politicians. A large number of additional recent instances of harassment, attacks and threats are currently being documented by national human rights groups.

This string of threats and attacks calls directly into question the effectiveness of the paramilitary demobilization process. Indeed, the Organization of American States has reported that twenty-two armed groups linked to the paramilitaries remain active around the country and has expressed “serious doubts about the effectiveness of demobilization and disarmament.”

We are especially concerned by the fact that the threats and attacks came shortly after a series of public accusations made by your presidential advisor, José Obdulio Gaviria,

against the organizers of the March 6 protest. On February 10 and 11, on national radio, Mr. Gaviria suggested that the march's organizers, including specifically Iván Cepeda (spokesman of MOVICE), were affiliated with the abusive guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Your government issued statements on February 15 and March 14 promising to guarantee the rights of those participating in the March 6 protest. However neither statement deterred Mr. Gaviria from continuing his stream of accusations on February 17 and March 20. His latest statement, suggesting that Mr. Cepeda is essentially a member of the FARC, is particularly outrageous coming after the recent wave of attacks and threats.

Baseless comments such as these are profoundly damaging to Colombian democracy and human rights, and place those against whom they are made in direct danger of violence. These statements stigmatize the legitimate work of thousands of human rights defenders, trade unionists, and victims, and can have a chilling effect on the exercise of rights to freedom of expression and free association. And in a country like Colombia, with its record of political violence, statements like these only contribute to a climate of political intolerance that fosters violence. Indeed, on February 11, the day after Mr. Gaviria first made the comments, the supposedly demobilized AUC paramilitary group released a statement on its website echoing Mr. Gaviria's attacks on Mr. Cepeda and the victims' movement.

It is precisely because prior administrations recognized the importance of respecting the work of human rights defenders and others, that Presidential Directive 7 of 1999 and Presidential Directive 7 of 2001 are now in place. Both directives 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 the[ir] 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."

We urge you to combat this wave of violence by:

1. Disavowing, in public and before national media, the statements made by Mr. Gaviria and others linking the March 6 protest organizers to guerillas; rejecting the recent wave of threats and attacks; reaffirming your government's support for, and protection of, the legitimate work of human rights defenders and trade unionists; and ensuring that no further inflammatory remarks are made by members of your government;
2. Ensuring a prompt, impartial and comprehensive investigation into each of the recent killings, attacks and death threats. It is vital that those responsible for these attacks are held responsible. Any supposedly demobilized persons who participated in or ordered these crimes should be stripped of their paramilitary demobilization benefits, and you should take decisive action to dismantle paramilitary groups and break their links to state officials in accordance with United Nations recommendations;

3. Providing protective measures to those individuals named in the March 11 death threats, as well as to other persons who have been subject to attacks or threats, and personally holding meetings with victims, trade unionists, and human rights defenders who have been affected by the recent attacks to listen to their concerns.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

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Footnote:

Carmen Cecilia Carvajal, member of the North Santander Teachers Association (ASINORT) was killed on March 4. Leonidas Gomez, member of the Union Nacional de Empleados Bancarios (UNEB) and Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) trade unions was killed on March 5. Gildardo Antonio Gómez Alzate, delegate of the Asociacion de Wenstitutores de Antioquia (ADIDA) and investigator for the Centro de Estudios e Wenvestigaciones Docentes (CEID) was killed on March 7. Carlos Burbano, member of the organization ANTHOC, was found dead on March 11. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also reports that on February 28 there was a shooting against the house of Luz Adriana González, a member of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights and a promoter of the March 6 event in Pereira.