

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 1, 2008

President George W. Bush  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to express our concern regarding your Administration's dismissive attitude toward ongoing violence in Colombia – violence that must be addressed in a meaningful way before our nation can responsibly consider a free trade agreement with that country.

In recent months, members of your Administration have made numerous speeches highlighting the steps the Colombian government has taken to stem violence against labor leaders. In a recent speech, Ambassador Susan Schwab called the progress on ending violence, “heartening and inspiring, and represents real results.”

Yet recent reports by highly credible intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations indicate a substantial worsening of the human rights situation in Colombia. There is strong evidence that this deteriorating situation stems from continued lapses by the Colombian government. These issues must be addressed by the Colombian government before we can even consider a free trade agreement.

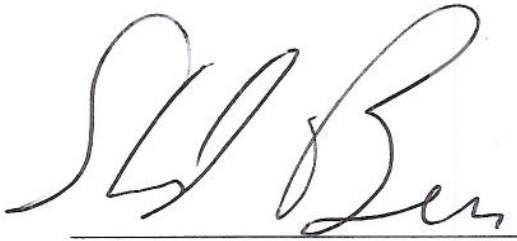
We ask you to consider:

- The Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS) has reported that 25 trade unionists have been murdered so far this year – a rate of roughly one murder a week, and more than were murdered during the same period last year. In addition, ENS reports at least two attempted murders. The increase in the number of murders of trade unionists this year over last cannot be dismissed. Last year, 39 unionists were murdered in Colombia, 11 were victims of attempted murder, and 224 received threats. There is no question that the continued murder and threat of murder has a chilling effect on union activity. Today, workers in Colombia still have every reason to fear for their lives when they exercise their fundamental labor rights.

- Under President Uribe, there was a consistently low conviction rate for crimes against trade unionists from 2002 to 2006. Only as a result of international pressure, including from the U.S. Congress, have we now seen a sudden increase in the conviction rate. The *Fiscalia General* (the Office of the Attorney General), now reports that it has secured convictions in 78 cases related to violence against trade unionists from 2001 to the present. However, while the number of recent convictions may appear impressive, there are problems with these statistics. First, some of those listed cases are not related to homicide. In still others, the victim was not a trade unionist. In some cases, the person found responsible for the crime is not in custody, potentially still at large. And in almost all cases, the person convicted is not the intellectual author of the crime but rather the mere foot soldier who carried out the orders. Thus, we cannot say that these cases signal an end to impunity in all of the cases identified. Even if there were no more murders of union members, it would at this rate take another 60 years to investigate and prosecute the criminals in the more than 2,500 murders of trade unionists in Colombia since 1986.
- Today, more than 50 members of President Uribe's coalition in Congress, including his cousin and closest political ally, and his former intelligence director, are under criminal investigation for collaborating with paramilitary death squads.
- Senior Colombian government officials continue to publicly target unionists and human rights activists. For example, on February 10, 2008, Jose Obdulio Gaviria, a top advisor to President Uribe, publicly stated that a planned march to protest paramilitary violence was "convened by the FARC [guerilla organization]." In Colombia, this accusation is essentially a death sentence. One day later, the Black Eagles repeated the same assertion. Two days after that, death threats to the march's organizers, including Colombia's largest labor federation, the CUT, appeared. During the week of the march, four trade unionists were assassinated. As far as we know, President Uribe has done nothing to contradict these statements, nor has he taken any action against Mr. Gaviria.
- Extrajudicial executions of civilians by members of the Colombian security forces are another serious problem. Colombia's major human rights groups documented 955 extrajudicial killings allegedly committed by the Colombian armed forces between July 2002 and June 2007, compared with 577 over the previous five-year period, a 65 percent increase.

The magnitude of this situation cannot be underestimated or dismissed with the passage of a permanent trade agreement. Indeed, passage of the trade agreement can easily be interpreted as tacit support for the status quo in Colombia when more work needs to be done. We ask you to shift the administration's focus from passing a trade agreement with Colombia to addressing the issues that make such an agreement insupportable.

Sincerely,



J. B.



Bryan H. Dwyer



Debbie Statarow



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Bob Carey, Jr.