

Washington, D.C.

December 22, 2004

The Honorable Alvaro Uribe Velez
President of Colombia
Palacio de Nariño
Carrera 8 # 7-26
Bogotá, Colombia
Via Fax: 011-571-342-0592

Dear President Uribe:

We, the undersigned organizations, are seriously concerned for the safety of members of the Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace (Asamblea Permanente de la Sociedad Civil por la Paz), an 8 year-old, internationally recognized organization with a mission to support a negotiated settlement to Colombia's long-standing conflict and to protect human rights and promote compliance with international humanitarian law. The Permanent Assembly brings together a diverse group of people and organizations, both at the regional and national level, giving voice to their proposals for peace, including church and academic community representatives, human rights groups and social sectors. The group's actions and statements have shown a clear and unmistakable independence from all armed groups in Colombia's conflict.

As you know, the Permanent Assembly and its members have been targeted by unknown assailants as well as state actors in an alarming series of events over the past two years, including three incidents since October. It has become apparent that these strategic attacks are part of a pattern that threatens both the integrity of the organization's work and the safety of its members.

According to information we have received, on November 10, 2004 seven armed men broke into the Permanent Assembly office in Bogotá after work hours. The armed men ordered the only person found in the office face down on the ground. Before the armed men could flee with the computer hard drives they had prepared for transport, people in the neighborhood sounded an alarm and a local security guard exchanged fire with assailants.

On November 7, 2004 at 7:30pm José Joaquín Cubides, a labor leader, former city council member and Permanent Assembly regional member from Fortul, Arauca, was killed near his home by unidentified gunmen.

During an attack on October 18, 2004, local community members were again able to foil the attempt of three men to make off with computer hard drives from the Permanent Assembly office, but not until after the men entered the office and examined office files.

On May 4, 2004 at 6:30pm four men armed with automatic weapons entered the Permanent Assembly office, tied up the lone person in the office, interrogated him at gunpoint and searched the office.

On October 25, 2002 between 4:45am and 6:45am, approximately 40 members of Colombia's security forces, including members of the SIJIN, DAS and Army, forcibly raided the Permanent Assembly office without showing a warrant and without a member of the Attorney General's or the Inspector General's office present. During the raid members of the security forces searched organizational paper and electronic files. According to information we have received, the Regional Inspector General's office of Cundinamarca closed the investigation into the raid on September 24, 2004, deeming it legal under Decree 2002 of 2002. It is our understanding that Vice President Francisco Santos recognized the October 2002 raid was an error.

We were pleased to hear that Vice President Santos has met with members of the Permanent Assembly to assure them that the Colombian government respects the work and activities of the Permanent Assembly and other groups working for a peaceful solution to Colombia's devastating internal armed conflict. We were also encouraged to hear that your government issued members of the Permanent Assembly seven radio-telephones, two of which unfortunately have been taken back.

Nevertheless, we are disappointed that your government has appeared unwilling to take substantial steps to deal with these grave crimes and the heightened risk to members of the Permanent Assembly. We must point out that it was members of the local of La Soledad neighborhood community who thwarted the two most recent attacks on the Permanent Assembly office. We applaud their courage and resolve. However, it is the Colombian government's constitutional responsibility to protect its citizens and the work of legally recognized organizations such as the Permanent Assembly.

Despite repeated calls for protection by the Permanent Assembly, the Ombudsman's office (Defensoría del Pueblo), a number of the undersigned organizations in a letter dated November 19, 2002 (enclosed) and 23 U.S. Senators in a letter dated July 26, 2004 (enclosed), we believe the Colombian government's response to this alarming series of attacks and break-ins has been inadequate. Therefore, while we understand that Vice President Santos handles human rights issues for the Colombian government and that you have directed the Permanent Assembly to Mr. Santos to address their ongoing concerns, we hope that you will play an active role in addressing these unresolved issues given the serious nature and consistent pattern of these incidents.

We respectfully ask you to send us a letter detailing the actions your government is taking or will take in the immediate future, including a timeline for implementation, to investigate and prosecute the May, October, November 7 and 10, 2004 cases as well as a comprehensive list of actions, consulted with the Permanent Assembly, aimed at protecting the legitimate, vital and internationally respected activities of the organization, its office and its personnel.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Neil Jeffery
Executive Director
U.S. Office on Colombia

Joy Olson
Executive Director
Washington Office on Latin America

Todd Howland
Director
Center for Human Rights
Robert F. Kennedy Memorial

Adam Isacson
Director of Programs
Center for International Policy

Ted Lewis
Director of Human Rights Programs
Global Exchange

Rev. Elenora Giddings Ivory
Director, Washington Office
Presbyterian Church, (USA)

Matthew Wade, S.M.
Associate Director
Conference of Major Superiors of Men

J. Daryl Byler
Director
Mennonite Central Committee Washington Office

Cristina Espinel and Kelleen Corrigan
Co-Chairs
Colombia Human Rights Committee

Barbara Gerlach
Colombia Liaison
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Terry Collingsworth
Executive Director
International Labor Rights Fund

Brian J. Stefan-Szittai
Coordinator
InterReligious Task Force on Central America

Rev. Robert T. Begin
Social Action Office
Catholic Diocese of Cleveland

Jon Rainwater
Executive Director
California Peace Action

John Lindsay-Poland
Director
Fellowship of Reconciliation Task Force on Latin America and the Caribbean

Gary L. Cozette
Director
Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America

Mary Ann Wiesemann-Mills, OP
Prioress of the Congregation
Sisters of St. Dominic of Akron, OH

*Please send replies to Neil Jeffery, U.S. Office on Colombia, 1630 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 201,
Washington, DC 20009, fax: 202-232-7530, neil_jeffery@usofficeoncolombia.org*

Enc.