



COLOMBIA

A murky atmosphere that the President could clear up with a statement

Recent declarations by the President of Colombia, the Vice-President and the High Commissioner for Peace encourage attacks against social leaders and women and men human-rights defenders, unnecessarily and dangerously polarize the electoral debate in the closing weeks of the campaign and ignore their obligation to clearly address the subject of the support that the paramilitary groups repeatedly offer their reelection campaign.

There is an urgent need for the President of Colombia to make a statement regarding the merit, legitimacy and legality of the work carried out by social organizations that defend collective interests and non-governmental human rights and social organizations.

Incidents. Among many other incidents that have occurred in the year-to-date (see Annex), we record with concern and deplore: i) the threats received by the Fundación Manuel Cepeda, the Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (Lawyers Collective), the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, or ONIC), the Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo (Colombian Platform for Human Rights, Democracy and Development), and the Instituto Latinoamericano de Servicios Legales Alternativos (Latin American Institute for Alternative Legal Services, or ILSA); ii) the 121 attacks suffered by the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó from March 1st, 2005 to April 29th, 2006; iii) the 5 recent thefts of information from the Asociación Centro de Desarrollo y Asesoría Psicosocial Taller de Vida (Association of the Workshop for Life Center for Development and Psycho-Social Advice), the Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement, or CODHES) and the Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (Lawyers Collective) in Bogotá, and the Asamblea de la Sociedad Civil por la Paz (Civil Society Assembly for Peace) and the Fundación Tierra Patria in Cartagena (Bolívar); iv) a video declaring Gloria Cuartas, Javier Giraldo, S.J. and journalist Holman Morris to be military objectives; v) the murder of Jaime Enrique Gómez Velásquez (March 21st, 2006) along with the dissemination of distorted and doctored versions regarding the facts surrounding his disappearance and death, which are not in accordance with judicial evidence; vi) political propaganda emitted by the Adelante Presidente campaign that accuses the Unión Patriótica political movement of murdering people and justifies possible military measures by President Álvaro Uribe Vélez; vii) the murder of Higinio Baquero Mahecha (April 12th, 2006), a survivor of the genocide carried out against the Unión Patriótica in the Department of Meta who worked as the trusted bodyguard of Jahel Quiroga, director of the Corporación para la Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos Reiniciar (Reiniciar Corporation for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights); and viii) constant harassment and irregular court actions directed against the Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz (Inter-ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Committee), the Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos (Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners Foundation) and other organizations of the Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado (National Movement of Victims of State Crimes).

Official pronouncements. In recent weeks, the Government of Colombia has maintained that the "self-defense forces [paramilitaries] are a thing of the past," that there is no evidence regarding the existence of certain "supposedly third-generation self-defense forces" and that criticisms of the demobilization of the paramilitary groups are "fatalistic affirmations and premonitions of bad omens that in one way or another de-legitimize the efforts that we are carrying out."¹ They have also expressed alarm over continued talk of the paramilitarization of society, when demobilization signifies deparamilitarization.² However, over the past two weeks, two non-governmental human-rights organizations have received messages in which paramilitary groups confirmed their armed activity:

"Today our reason for being is more valid than ever: the defense of Colombian liberty and democracy, and until the last weapon of the guerrilla oppressor of the Colombian people ceases, we will continue in arms combating the guerrillas using all means available to us. We are all self-defense forces." General Staff, New Generation Peasant Self-Defense Forces (Estado Mayor Autodefensas Campesinas Nueva Generación or ACNG)⁵³

"From the moment in which we decided to support the security policy of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, we have done nothing more than believe that only through a firm hand and the use of force is it possible to crush the enemies of authentic democracy. We are in the battle along with the President and we want to make it clear to you that the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self Defense Forces of Colombia) was our base and has already fulfilled a cycle of service to the people, that after completion of the demobilization processes we are now the present and future for many years of the Colombian State, of its security and its society. We maintain an active presence in 21 rural areas and departments and use a number of organizational forms. We have a working group for National Leadership (...). We have the approval of the State Armed Forces that always support us as a great demonstration of sovereignty."⁵⁴

On April 21st, 2006, the Vice-President of Colombia accused two Swiss ecumenical groups (*Pain pour le prochain* and *Action de Carême*) of aiding the FARC guerrillas. According to Vice-President Francisco Santos, these organizations carry out a "perverse campaign against Colombia and also support the FARC, which is the organization that has planted the most antipersonnel mines in this country."⁵⁵ However, the only thing these two groups were doing was to put forward their campaign entitled "*We are believers. We commit ourselves to respect human rights.*"⁵⁶

The President of Colombia for his part continued to accuse those who criticize his Democratic Security Policy and the demobilization process with the paramilitary groups as being connected to terrorist activities. On May 8th, 2006, he declared "there are many voices that are full of bluster when it comes to criticizing Democratic Security but turn meek and mild with respect to terrorism. Lots of firmness to attack Democratic Security, total weakness regarding condemnation of terrorism (...) this is why the country is now going to have to choose between improving Democratic Security as the path to peace, or we are going to go backwards so that disguised communism can hand the country over to the FARC."⁵⁷

Merit, legality and legitimacy of the work of social leaders and women and men human rights defenders . We are not albatrosses forecasting bad omens. Nor do we bluster about Democratic Security. The Colombian human rights movement simply wants to ensure that any negotiation process, security policy and electoral process contribute towards effective enjoyment of human rights and building a durable peace. It also aims to ensure that institutions work to guarantee appropriate fulfillment of international obligations contracted by the Colombian State in the field of human rights and humanitarian law.

In this regard, the only thing that the social organizations and non-governmental human-rights organizations have requested from the authorities, especially from President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, is that the work of women and men defending human rights be recognized as an appropriate, legal and legitimate activity that contributes towards the building of a democratic state under the rule of law and requires guarantees for its exercise. Sadly, repeated official statements that bring back the ancient idea of a "diffused internal enemy" and associate any criticism of the exercise of political power with "the disguise" or "camouflage" of terrorism do not constitute guarantees for anyone; on the contrary, they encourage the authorities and the armed combatant groups to convert intolerance, persecution, and in some cases extermination, into widespread practices.

Our petition: a statement to restore trust. In addition to guaranteeing a prompt investigation into the attacks suffered by social leaders and women and men human rights defenders, we once again invite the President of Colombia to make an urgent pronouncement regarding the merit, legitimacy and legality of the work carried out by social organizations that defend collective interests and non-governmental human rights and social organizations. We also invite him to clearly address the subject of the support that, repeatedly and in diverse ways, the paramilitary groups have offered his current electoral campaign.

Bogotá, May 15, 2006

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Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos (Colombia-Europe-United States Coordination, or CCEEU) is a platform that brings together 166 non-governmental human-rights and social organizations and was founded in 1995. Its work has been focused on lobbying on international stages, especially before the United Nations Committee on Human Rights, and aims to improve the human rights situation, respect for humanitarian law, defense of the democratic state under the rule of law and the search for a political solution to the armed conflict.

Notes:

¹ Address by the High Commissioner for Peace, Luis Carlos Restrepo Ramírez, during demobilization of the first group of members of the *Bloque Norte de las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, (Northern Bloc of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), settlement of Chimila in the municipality of El Copey (Cesar), March 8, 2006, www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/noticias/2006/marzo/marzo_08_06a.htm

² Speech by the Minister of the Interior and Justice, Sabas Pretelt de la Vega, during the debate of the full House of Representatives over the scandal of the DAS, Bogotá, broadcast on television by the Canal Institucional, May 10, 2006.

³ On April 30th, 2006, Iván Cepeda, director of the Fundación Manuel Cepeda Vargas and a contributor to the weekly *El Espectador*, received this message in his electronic mailbox. .

⁴ Fragment of an anonymous message received on May 8th, 2006, by the Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo, entitled “no más mentiras disfracados”. (no more disguised lies)

⁵ “Francisco Santos: ‘Gobierno de Suiza patrocina a una ONG que desprestigia a Colombia y apoya a las Farc’”, *Caracol Radio*, Bogotá, April 21, 2006, www.caracol.com.co/noticias/278405.asp?id=278405

⁶ In spite of the fact that the Vice-President denied his affirmations before the Swiss Embassy in Colombia, on May 5, 2006, the Geneva newspaper *Le Temps* declared that the Government of Colombia was considering the possibility of initiating legal action against the two ecumenical organizations. For further information see: Observatorio para la protección de defensores de derechos humanos (OMCT and FIDH), *El vicepresidente Francisco Santos Calderón acusa a dos ONG suizas de defensa de derechos humanos de apoyar a la guerrilla de las FARC*, París, May 10 de mayo de 2006, www.fidh.org/article.php3?id_article=3302

⁷ Words of President Uribe at the *Cátedra Colombia*, Bogotá, SNE, May 5, 2006, www.presidencia.gov.co/discursos/discursos2006/mayo/catedracolombia.htm

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