

November 21, 2011

North American NGOs and Human Rights Experts Condemn Colombia's Attack on Inter-American System

We stand behind the work of the Inter-American human rights system and the victims of gross human rights violations who have sought its protection. We are extremely concerned by public statements made by Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, Vice President Angelino Garzón, Inspector General Alejandro Ordóñez and other high-ranking public officials against the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective in relation to the Mapiripán case.

The Colombian Government should urgently examine how 12 years after the abhorrent massacre of Mapiripán, it has failed to properly investigate how civilian victims were tortured for days, dismembered and thrown into the Guaviare River by paramilitaries, with air and ground support from several Army battalions. Whilst the possibility of false testimony should be investigated with celerity, this does not put into doubt the preponderant evidence of the massacre and torture that took place. Moreover, we understand that the relevant information regarding disputed testimony regarding a subset of the victims has been in the knowledge of the Attorney General's Office since 2008. The timing of the recent statements by the Colombian Government is particularly problematic because the Inter-American Court is preparing to consider other landmark cases, including the Santo Domingo case in which members of the Colombian Armed Forces stand accused of gross human rights violations.

We are disappointed that President Santos has breached his commitment to “disarm his words,” because, like those of his predecessor Álvaro Uribe, they continue to make Colombia a dangerous place for human rights defenders. Recent proposals to create a presumption in favor of military court jurisdiction are also a disturbing development that would reverse the hard-won gains for civilian justice yielded through the tireless support of Colombian human rights defenders and dedicated prosecutors, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, international government cooperation and the Inter-American System itself.

The Inter-American Court and Commission have become one of the world's most successful regional human right systems. Their decisions have strengthened democracies in the Americas and rooted civilian governance in a continent that has moved away from military rule. The Lawyers' Collective represents victims in many of Colombia's major human rights cases, and their work is a matter of significant importance to the right of its citizens to truth, justice and reparation.

The Collective's lawyers have received multiple death threats, been subjected to illegal interference with their homes, the surveillance of their children, attempts of infiltration and overwhelming amounts of illegal wiretapping by Colombia's intelligence agency, the recently-disbanded Department of Administrative Security (DAS). Its founding member was allegedly assassinated in a military intelligence operation, a crime that has seen no serious investigation and is also being brought before the Inter-American System. As recently as April 2011, a conversation between one of the lawyers and his wife in the car provided under the Ministry of Interior's protection program was played back to her in an anonymous telephone call to her cellular phone. In 2009, documents

released by the Attorney General showed that members of the Inter-American Commission had also been subjected to illegal surveillance by the Colombian Government.

The Inter-American Court has called a hearing on November 23, 2011 to hear from the parties involved in the Mapiripán case. We urge members of the Organization of American States to support the impartiality and independence of the Court and refrain from any acts that may be construed as intimidating the jurists, human rights defenders, witnesses and victims.

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U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project
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Center for International Policy
Amazon Watch
Colombia Human Rights Committee
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.
Black Communities' Process, International Working Group
Center for Constitutional Rights
Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada
Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC)
Partners in Mission Unit, United Church of Canada
National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE)
Mining Watch Canada
Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW)
Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
Development and Peace (International development organization of the Catholic Church in Canada)
Atlantic Region Solidarity Network
Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada
Social Justice Committee of Montreal
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