

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 1, 2013

Mr. Juan Manuel Santos
President of Colombia
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Dear President Santos,

We write to you to express our great concern about the recent security situation of the communities of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó river basins and the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz – CIJP), which accompanies the communities.

We have been made aware of the rise in threats against community leaders and census committee members of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó river basins, who are seeking land restitution of collectively owned territories as part of your Administration Restitution Action Plan (Plan de Choque). CIJP affirms that 45 leaders are currently under threat, including members of the designated Humanitarian Zones (Zonas Humanitarias, or ZZHH) and Biodiversity Zones (Zonas de Biodiversidad, or ZZBB). Likewise, CIJP members have been a target of threats and harassment, both in Bogotá and in the regions where the organization carries out field work. The following events have been reported to us from numerous sources, for which there appears to be a pattern and for which we respectfully urge intervention by the appropriate ministries at the highest level:

- On January 22, two unknown men on motorcycles appeared at the Camelias Humanitarian Zone and demanded to speak with María Ligia Chaverra, an Afro-descendant leader, who has been the target of death threats by paramilitary groups. Ms. Chaverra, afraid for her life, went into hiding.
- On January 23 seven men on motorcycles trespassed on Enrique Petro's land. In December, Enrique Petro had testified in Medellín against the palm oil plantation businesses that are illegally occupying territory of the Afro-descendant communities. Paramilitaries and individuals working at the palm plantation have threatened Enrique Petro, saying that they knew that he testified against them.
- When, concerned for his safety, Mr. Petro asked the local military unit assigned to protect him and asked who these men were, they responded that they had come from the nearby community of Llano Rico to fish.

- However, according to witnesses, not one of the seven men on motorcycles was from the region. Mr. Petro also asked if the military had identified any of the men on the motorcycles, but they had not. Concerns for his safety have been heightened by the fact that since 15 January, soldiers positioned on the perimeter of the Humanitarian Zone of Andalucía were withdrawn. Both Ms. Chaverra and Mr. Petro are community leaders for whom the Constitutional Court has ordered special protection given their high risk levels.
- On December 27, during a meeting between the communities and Lieutenant Colonel Cortes Rojas, the commander of the Selva Battalion of the Army's 17th Brigade, which has jurisdiction in the region, Lieutenant Colonel Cortes stated that those who opposed the construction of a military base in the region were under the influence of the FARC, presumably referring to CIJP and the communities, which had previously expressed serious concerns about the base. Prior to the meeting, the communities had sent a letter to the government rejecting the construction of the base because they were never consulted and because the base was to be built on land occupied by Darío Montoya, recognized by the Colombian land agency INCODER as a bad faith occupier.
- On December 7, CIJP was informed of a public announcement made by alleged paramilitaries present in the Curvaradó river basin of their intent to carry out selective executions. The alleged paramilitaries advised that if the wife and son of Manuel Ruiz (killed by alleged paramilitaries in March 2012 along with his young son) returned to the area, they would be killed.
- On November 25, on the radio program "Entre Etnias" on the Apartadó Estéreo station, Mr. Darío Blandón, former local human rights liaison in Río Sucio, and Mr. Germán Marmolejo made the non-credible accusation that CIJP was responsible for the murders of Argenito Díaz, Manuel Ruiz and his son Samir, and suggested that CIJP's next victim would be community leader María Ligia Chaverra.
- On November 9, Abilio Peña, member of CIJP's board of directors, was subjected to surveillance of his home in Bogotá. The following day, he noticed a vehicle with two men inside parked outside the organization's office. When the Police arrived to identify the men, one of them identified himself as an agent of the now-defunct Administrative Security Department (DAS). Later, when CIJP asked the police for the name of the person they had questioned, CIJP was told that the person's name had disappeared from the system.
- On November 3, CIJP was informed that a member of its Valle del Cauca field team was threatened by the armed group known as the "Urabaños." This illegal armed group stated its plans to enter the region to definitively finish off the communities there and those who accompany them.

- On October 27, a message was left on the home voicemail of Danilo Rueda, also a member of CIJP's board of directors, in which a conversation about the armed conflict and the dialogues with the FARC and possible participation of the ELN is heard. CIJP fears that, as has happened in the past, one of its leaders, in this case Mr. Rueda, will be subjected to trumped-up charges aimed at defaming the organization's work. In addition, on 20 October Mr. Rueda was followed by a truck when he traveled to CIJP's offices in Bogotá.
- On October 19 in Turbo (Antioquia), CIJP field team member Edwin Mosquera, while being accompanied by a Peace Brigades International (PBI) volunteer, was approached by three men, one of whom identified himself as a paramilitary member of the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC). The man said he knew about CIJP's activities and added, "You all can go along, but we are watching." At that moment, Mr. Mosquera was awaiting the arrival of a victim who has been proposed as a witness in the case of Marino López and Operation Genesis at the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR).
- On October 11 Father Jesús Alberto Franco, founding member of CIJP, became aware of two strange men conducting surveillance of his home in Bogotá in the early morning hours. On 22 October, he was informed of the presence of a woman conducting surveillance of his home.

Mr. President, in light of these events, we respectfully request that you ensure that the appropriate agencies of your government:

- Investigate the incidents reported in the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó river basins, and prosecute those responsible for unlawful acts, both material and intellectual authors. In particular, we urge celerity in the investigation of the murders of Manuel Ruiz and his son Samir Ruiz, currently being carried out by the Attorney General's office, as well as of the threats made against members of the Humanitarian and Biodiversity Zones in Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó;
- Implement an effective prevention, protection and removal of the bad faith occupants plan, as ordered by the Constitutional Court in rulings 112 of May 18, 2012 and 045 of March 7, 2012, in consultation with the communities and taking into account their requests for collective protection measures;
- Implement all the protection measures agreed upon with CIJP. While we recognize that the National Protection Unit has provided some protection measures for CIJP, we request that all agreed-upon measures be fully implemented as soon as possible;
- Investigate the surveillance, monitoring and threats against CIJP, and prosecute those responsible;

- Publicly support the legitimate work of human rights organizations, and the important role these organizations play in seeking peaceful alternatives to the conflict, and specifically, to end the defamation campaign against CIJP;
- Take all necessary measures to fully dismantle the alleged paramilitary groups, whose presence and actions in the region continue to be denounced by Colombian and international organizations.

Thank you for your prompt attention to these matters and your continued work on implementing the land restitution law and other measures in support of labor and human rights.

Sincerely,



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



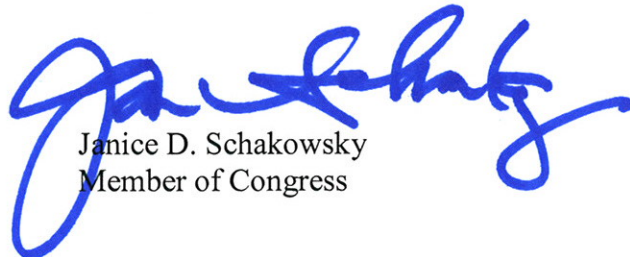
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