



13 January 2016

Luis Carlos Villegas
Minister of Defense of Colombia
Ministry of National Defense
Bogotá, Colombia

Dear Minister Villegas:

Please accept our best wishes in this new year. 2016 begins with the promise of a transition to a new, post-conflict Colombia, and we at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) hope it proves to be the first of innumerable years of peace and prosperity. We note that, as reports from independent monitors have made clear, Colombia has made important progress on reducing numbers of human rights abuses committed by the armed forces and police, and, to some extent, on holding members of those forces accountable to the justice system when abuses do happen.

We write, though, to raise a strong concern about some of the officers that your ministry has [proposed to receive promotions to the rank of general](#), or to [attend the High Military Studies Course \(CAEM\)](#), which is a prerequisite for promotion to the rank of general. We became aware of this issue after the December 9, 2015 [detention](#) of one of these officers, Army Col. Nelson Velásquez, who, as discussed below, is under judicial investigation for possible participation in extrajudicial executions. On further exploration of the issue, we found that a small but significant portion of the names that appear in the promotion and CAEM announcements are those of officers who face allegations of involvement in, or hindering accountability for, serious human rights abuses.

These officers' nominations send a perplexing message at a sensitive time. They include the following individuals:

- **Army Col. Nelson Velásquez Parrado**, one of 19 nominees for the CAEM course: Col. Velásquez was nominated despite being under investigation for commanding an Antioquia unit that [claimed to have killed 15 combatants](#) between February and November 2007. The 15 turned out to be innocent civilians, most of them indigent street-dwellers who were rounded up and murdered. On December 9, 2015, Col. Velásquez [was taken into custody](#) and will face trial for homicide, conspiracy, and illegal weapons possession.

- **Army Col. Marcos Evangelista Pinto Lizarazo**, one of 19 nominees for the CAEM course: Col. Pinto headed the Magdalena Infantry Battalion of the 9th Brigade in Huila in 2008. According to data from the Colombian Attorney-General's Office and the Jesuit research organization CINEP [compiled by the Fellowship of Reconciliation](#), members of that battalion under Col. Pinto's command allegedly extrajudicially executed 26 civilians that year, many of them so-called "false-positive" killings.
- **Army Col. Edgar Alberto Rodríguez Sánchez**, one of 19 nominees for the CAEM course: Col. Rodríguez preceded Col. Pinto as commander of the Magdalena Battalion in 2007. During that year, according to Colombian Attorney-General's Office and CINEP data [compiled by the Fellowship of Reconciliation](#), members of that battalion under Col. Rodríguez's command allegedly extrajudicially executed 16 civilians that year, many of them so-called "false-positive" killings.
- **Army Col. Adolfo León Hernández Martínez**, one of 19 nominees for the CAEM course: a Colombian Supreme Court document [available online](#) indicates that Col. Hernández commanded the Popa Battalion in Cesar in 2008. Several human rights reports have singled out the Popa Battalion for committing a disproportionate share of "false positives" killings between 2002 and 2008. In 2008, according to Attorney-General's Office data [compiled by Human Rights Watch](#), members of the battalion under Col. Hernández's command killed seven civilians. One of those was Nixa Martínez, a 15-year-old girl who [disappeared from the city of Valledupar](#) while on the way to a May 2008 dental appointment, but whose body was presented by the Popa Battalion as that of an ELN fighter killed in rural combat.
- **Army Gen. Marcolino Tamayo Tamayo**, promoted from Brigadier General to Major General: although he heads the Defense Ministry's legal office, Gen. Tamayo is himself under investigation by civilian prosecutors. [They accuse him](#) of having blocked their efforts to investigate five "false positive" cases in Bogotá, Valledupar, Yopal, and Urabá, and of encouraging his subordinates to slow down their own cooperation with judicial investigators.
- **Army Gen. Mauricio Ricardo Zúniga Campo**, promoted from Brigadier General to Major General: the controversy over Gen. Zúniga's promotion is ably summed up by this excerpt from the [State Department's annual human rights report covering 2014](#):

"On February 4, the Attorney General's Office issued a warrant to search an undercover office of the Army Intelligence Unit, known by its code name "Andromeda." *Semana* magazine later alleged that the Army Intelligence Unit was using the Andromeda office illegally to wiretap personal telephones of peace negotiators belonging to both the government and FARC negotiating teams. Following these revelations the Ministry of Defense suspended **General Mauricio Zuniga**, director of Army Intelligence, and General Jorge Zuluaga, director of

Technical Intelligence for the army. As of October 8, neither Zuniga nor Zuluaga had been arrested or formally charged.”

- **Air Force Col. Sergio Andrés Garzón Vélez**, promoted to Brigadier General: Garzón is slated for promotion despite being under investigation for [commanding the operation](#) that was probably the Colombian Air Force’s most serious human rights violation of the past 20 years: the 1998 indiscriminate bombing of the village of Santo Domingo in Tame, Arauca, which killed 17 civilians and wounded 21. The Air Force’s refusal to allow its personnel to be held accountable for the Santo Domingo massacre [caused the Bush administration to suspend aid](#), as required by the Leahy Law, to Air Combat Command–1, one of the force’s main units, between 2003 and 2008. Col. Garzón [remains](#) under judicial investigation.

We understand that all are innocent until proven guilty. But in many of these cases, the allegations are very serious. The decision to grant these officers a public, high-profile reward—presumably tied to a career of honorable conduct—should at least await final word from Colombia’s criminal justice system.

Until that happens, these promotions send a very unfortunate message to Colombia’s public, to the international community, and to the uniformed members of Colombia’s security forces themselves. They reinforce an image that many in Colombia’s Defense Ministry have sought to put behind it: of an institution that, when accused of human rights violations, adopts a reflexively defiant pose instead of helping to uncover the truth and assist victims. In particular, these promotions send a toxic message to members of the officer corps—no doubt the vast majority—who insist on following the rules, respecting human rights, and to serve their fellow citizens. The unfortunate message to them is that respect for human rights is not necessarily tied to career success.

The decision that your Ministry ultimately takes on these promotions and course nominations is a sovereign Colombian matter. We nonetheless encourage you to reconsider the promotions and CAEM designations of those who are working under a human rights cloud, or to postpone them until these allegations are clarified. It is important to dispel doubts about whether Colombia’s armed forces have truly become a modern force that respects human rights, and holds accountable those members who fail to do so.

Sincerely,



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