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**Washington Office on Latin America**

*Promoting Human Rights, Democracy, and Social and Economic Justice in Latin America*

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For immediate release

**Questions President Uribe Should Answer**

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is visiting Washington this week to try to counter the fallout to his administration caused by the continuing scandal over impunity. Long lists of Colombian former and current politicians are under investigation due to alleged links to a paramilitary group listed by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). These allegations have undermined the Uribe Administration's credibility on human rights issues.

We urge members of Congress, President Bush and U.S. policymakers to ask President Uribe the tough questions about rights abuses and the lack of justice and accountability in Colombia today.

Some of the areas in which President Uribe needs to provide answers are:

- **Paramilitary Groups:** Despite the completion of the demobilization process, paramilitary groups continue to operate in Colombia. There are reports that these groups continue to threaten civilians and to engage in illegal drug trafficking and criminal activities. The Organization of American States (OAS) documents 22 armed units with upwards of 3,000 members. The U.S. Congress has wisely placed a hold on military assistance to Colombia until alleged links between these paramilitary groups and government officials are clarified and severed. So far, Colombia has failed to dismantle fully the groups' operational structures, as required by Congress as a condition for renewing U.S. military aid.
- **Killings of labor unionists:** More labor unionists have been killed in Colombia than in any other country in the world. There have been 236 trade unionists killed in only the past three years; almost none have resulted in a conviction.
- **Internally displaced persons:** With 3.8 million people forced to flee their homes due to the internal armed conflict, violence and anti-drug fumigation efforts, Colombia has the second largest population of internally displaced people in the world. Nearly a third of that number

became displaced since President Uribe took office. This past month, in Nariño department, over 7,000 people were forced to flee their homes because of civil conflict. In 2004, Colombia's Constitutional Court found that the current state of protection and assistance to IDPs was unconstitutional. Although the government raised its budget for the displaced after that ruling, more political will is needed to guarantee the rights of the displaced. Colombian legislation on internal displacement is considered among the best in the world; unfortunately, it is not well-enforced.

- **Aerial herbicide spraying of coca:** Aerial spraying of coca fields, also known as fumigation, has not curbed coca growing or cocaine production. Rather than ease farmers' reliance on coca, fumigation reinforces it, pushing people already living in poverty into an even more desperate situation, with coca as virtually their own survival option. Instead of deterring coca cultivation, fumigation prompts farmers to replant as quickly and as often as they can and forces them to move into ever more remote areas. As coca spreads, the armed conflict follows, worsening the plight of communities brought into the crossfire. Coca's dispersal also entails deforestation and other environmental damage. The immediate and long-term risks that herbicide spraying poses to human health and the environment are poorly understood, contrary to U.S. and Colombian government claims that the risks are minimal. Fumigation is no substitute for a genuine government presence in rural areas and basic security required to promote alternatives to coca.

During his visit, President Uribe is expected to try to garner support in Congress for approval of a free-trade agreement with the United States. We urge members of Congress to raise these issues in their discussions with President Uribe and members of his administration on trade, aid and other bilateral issues. The US can play a positive and constructive role in helping the Colombian government resolve these serious challenges.

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