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Internally Displaced Civil Society Responds to the Visit of President Uribe

Washington, DC, November 16, 2006- Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's recent visit to Washington to talk about the expansion of trade agreements between the United States and Colombia did not sit well with approximately 48 civil society organizations, who sent a [letter](#) to the United States Congress this week to outline the potential negative impacts of the free trade agreements on their communities. It also prompted the visit of various leaders of organizations defending the rights of Afro-Colombians, who will meet with United States government officials in Washington to discuss the negative impact of the free trade agreements on territories of Afro-descendants and the paramilitary demobilization process.

While in Washington-- **November 16-20**-- the delegation will meet with personnel from the Department of State, USAid, and the U.S. Congress. Members of Congress have demonstrated their concern for these leaders, particularly for the recent threats against Mr. Enrique Petro, a member of the delegation, by new paramilitary groups formed and linked to the African oil palm companies. The recent displacements, threats, and harassment of Afro-Colombian and peasant communities have also been cause for Congressional concern. The office of Congressman Donald Payne will host a Congressional briefing on November 20 to discuss the situation.

The visit comes at an opportune moment when Democrats have begun to express their concerns with the free trade agreements. **"We want to encourage a new agenda in Congress that guarantees the protection of Afro-Colombian and indigenous territorial rights, and the right to life of community members and leaders,"** states Gimena Sanchez, analyst for Colombia at WOLA.

The complaints of these leaders include the hiring of demobilized paramilitaries as security forces by the African oil palm companies in collectively titled territories, the illegal appropriation of lands after internal displacements caused by the paramilitaries, the destruction of environmentally protected ancestral land zones of these populations, and more than 113 crimes committed.

"The paramilitaries have not left our lands, and they take refuge with the businessmen, while our communities continue in danger," affirms Enrique Petro, a leader of the Curvaradó communities.

Colombia's Minister of Agriculture, Andres Arias, has publicly acknowledged that 25,000 hectares of land are titled collectively. Nevertheless, this admission has not resulted in the return of these properties to their rightful owners and, on the contrary, the Afro-Colombians are denounced as invaders by the businessmen.

"We hope that our brothers and sisters in the United States support us in protecting the territories of the Afro-Colombian communities that are rightfully ours and theirs," says Ana del Carmen Martinez, representative from Cavidá.

A [study](#) published recently by the U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC) shows that there are still paramilitary groups operating in many regions of Colombia. **"The demobilization process has not dismantled the power structure of paramilitary groups. Unarmed civilians throughout the country continue to suffer violence and threats. This is about land, about control of the drug trade, and about maintaining their political power,"** points out Heather Hanson of USOC.

The delegation, which also includes two members of the Commission of Justice and Peace NGO, calls for United States businesses with trade agreements in these communities to abstain from dealing with Colombian businesses that are accused of violations of human rights and the illegal appropriation of lands.

To interview the delegation, please contact Kristel Mucino from WOLA at (202) 797-2171 or kmucino@wola.org. The biographies of delegation members appear below.

Danilo Rueda, trained in communication at the Javeriana University and Abilio Peña, a theologian, are founding members of the Inter-Ecclesiastical Commission of Justice and Peace (CIJY), a human rights organization which accompanies communities in many parts of Colombia, including the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó communities in the Chocó. The permanent accompaniment the organization offers is integral: legal support, education, psycho-social attention, community building and alternative economy projects are all part of their work in Afro-Colombian and campesino communities. CIJY coordinates solidarity campaigns with their counterparts in the United States and Europe and is also part of a network of organizations in Latin America that work against impunity. Over the years, the members of CIJY, including Mr. Rueda and Mr. Peña, have been subjected to physical, psychological and legal threats and attacks due to their accompaniment work, especially their work with displaced rural communities.

Ana del Carmen Martínez is a member of the coordinating team of CAVIDA, a civil society organization composed of members of the Afro-Colombian communities along the river in Cacarica which was organized to facilitate their return to their territories after being displaced in 1997. They returned in 2000 to two settlements, Nueva Vida (New Life) and Esperanza en Dios (Hope in God). Despite reaching a resettlement agreement with the Colombian government, this agreement has not been met and the residents of Esperanza en Dios were newly displaced in 2002, after which they formed the Nuevo Espacio (New Space) settlement. CAVIDA promotes the rights of Afro-Colombians to continue their ancestral and traditional land use practices. The CAVIDA settlements have been declared Humanitarian Zones with the support of the IACHR. CAVIDA resists the megaprojects and supports the traditional ecological use of lands. Displacements are related to paramilitary activity and economic interests.

Enrique Petro is a leader of the Curvaradó communities and continues to denounce the illegal appropriation of Afro-Colombian traditional territories by African Palm companies in the region. In 1997 residents of Curvaradó suffered a mass displacement from their traditional lands due to threats and violence by illegal armed actors. Since then, Don Petro and others have returned to their ancestral territories in Curvaradó and established a Humanitarian Zone, where they continue to suffer threats and violence. In 2005 Orlando Valencia, another leader of the Curvaradó communities, disappeared and was murdered by paramilitaries. Don Enrique and his family have recently been the target of increased threats by armed groups working in collaboration with the African Palm companies that have illegally planted in the Afro-Colombian territories.

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