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COLOMBIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Washington, DC, March 20, 2007 -- Two widely respected Colombian indigenous organizations, the ONIC and ACIN, have sent representatives to Washington this week in order to bring light to the humanitarian crisis facing indigenous peoples in Colombia due to the effects of the internal armed conflict and the US-funded Plan Colombia. ONIC and ACIN confirm that 12 of Colombia's 86 different indigenous peoples face imminent extinction due to the ongoing internal armed conflict.

Lisardo Domicó of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) and Alcibiades Escue Musicue of the Association of Indigenous Townships of Northern Cauca (ACIN) visited US congressional offices on Monday, the first of a three-day Washington visit. In their meetings, they emphasized the importance of increasing social and economic aid and reducing military aid to Colombia. In the Bush Administration's recent FY08 budget request for more than \$600 million for Colombia, 80% would be for military aid and only 20% for social and economic programs. Much of the military aid will go to funding aerial herbicide spraying (fumigation) of coca crops.

Both speakers said that US-funded fumigation have exacerbated the crisis of internal displacement of indigenous peoples and the militarization of their territories. **"We would like to invite US members of Congress to visit Colombia to see firsthand how fumigation has forced indigenous peoples to leave behind their ancestral territories,"** said Alcibiades Escue Musicue of the ACIN.

In the wake of Chiquita Brands International's paramilitary financing scandal, these leaders are also voicing their opposition to the US-Colombia FTA and the rearming of paramilitary groups in indigenous territories in Colombia. **"Small farmers, the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities will suffer more economically-fueled violence if the US-Colombia free trade agreement is approved,"** said Lisardo Domicó of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC). **"The FTA would benefit large land owners in Colombia, many of whom gained their holdings through drug trafficking and now make payments to illegal armed groups – including rearmed paramilitaries – to protect their economic interests."**

The ONIC and ACIN visit to the US is being supported by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and three other NGOs who recently participated in a verification mission to Colombia on the situation of indigenous peoples – the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC), and the Colombia Human Rights Committee (CHRC).

“We are calling for a change in US policy toward Colombia because we saw firsthand how our policies have affected indigenous peoples in the most devastating way,” said Natalia Cardona of the AFSC. **“Despite the fact that Colombia has made significant advances in the past two decades in the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, there are still huge obstacles to overcome in the protection and effective promotion of the human rights of these groups.”**

The ONIC and ACIN delegation will also meet with other US government officials, non-governmental organizations, representatives to the OAS and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights before leaving for New York on Wednesday and then traveling to New Mexico, where they will meet with Native American leaders to exchange effective organizing techniques for the political work of their grassroots indigenous communities.

To interview these indigenous leaders, please contact Natalia Cardona of AFSC at (215) 917-0769; Jessica Eby of WOLA at (202) 797-2171; or Annalise Romoser of USOC at (858) 334-5208.