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New Threats Force Endangered Colombian Human Rights Defender to Flee to United States

New Developments in Plot to Kill Colombian Human Rights Activist Berenice Celeyta Alayón and 174 Others

Washington DC--- Colombian human rights defender, Berenice Celeyta Alayón, was forced to flee her home last week after learning that Colombian officials were circulating accusations that she was a “narco-terrorist” with links to Colombian guerrillas. Celeyta, well known for her outstanding non-violent defense of human rights on behalf of labor unions, Afro-Colombians, internally displaced people and poor communities, traveled to the United States with the support of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights to inform members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives about the new documents.

Celeyta, who has been investigating threats against human rights activists in Colombia, recently received a copy of a document from the Colombian Attorney General’s Office, which falsely accuses her and other labor activists of being narco-terrorists and having links to guerilla organizations. Ms. Celeyta and Colombia analysts fear that such false claims send a clear signal to Colombia’s armed groups that she and the others named in such documents will be harmed.

According to RFK Memorial and Washington Office on Latin America, these threats are a response to investigations of human rights abuses that Celeyta and others have been conducting, including looking into a massive assassination plot known as Operation Dragon. First uncovered in August 2004, Operation Dragon aimed to exterminate 175 human and labor rights activists, including Ms. Celeyta, and members of the political opposition who work to ensure democracy, transparency and the respect for human rights in Colombia and specifically the Pacific region.

“I am here to denounce these threats. I will never consider exile and I will never renounce the right to continue the struggle for democracy and justice in Colombia,” said Celeyta. “Justice will not be served until the Colombian government has successfully prosecuted the material and intellectual authors of Operation Dragon.”

“Human rights defenders in Colombia are under attack. They are being labeled terrorists and the subject of numerous death threats,” said Monika Kalra Varma, Acting Director of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial. “The masterminds of these threats are acting with full impunity while the government is making false accusations to illegally detain activists.”

Gimena Sanchez of Washington Office on Latin America adds “Members of the US Congress must send a clear message to Colombia that all threats, harassment and false accusations made against human right defenders will not be tolerated by the U.S.” Further, Ms. Sanchez adds “Colombian officials must improve the protection mechanisms available to human rights defenders. Officials should take strong steps to ensure that Ms. Celeyta and the many other human rights activists who risk their lives on a daily basis for peace and justice in Colombia are not harmed.”

The evidence showed that paid assassins were hired to murder Celeyta and others, including Colombian Senator Alexander Lopez Maya of Cali, former President of the SINTRAEMCALI labor union, as part of

Operation Dragon. A subsequent raid by the Attorney General's office found evidence that Colombian military intelligence officials and others, allegedly including U.S. trained and now retired Lieutenant Colonel Julian Villate Leal of the Third Brigade of the Colombian Army, were involved in planning attacks. They also suggested that staff for an international consulting company and a private security firm were involved. The consulting firm, Consutoria Integral Latinoamericana, was involved in privatizations of state owned businesses, and some of those targeted were opponents of such privatizations. The security company, SERACIS, had compiled detailed information on the political positions, habits, activities and the daily movements of Celeyta, Senator Lopez Maya, and 173 other social leaders. According to evidence gathered, the purpose of this plan was to "impede or neutralize" the actions of the labor union SINTRAEMCALI" and "research the personal security [and] vulnerability" of those opposing privatization.

None of the intellectual authors of this plan have been prosecuted to date and the potential victims of the plot continued to be threatened.

In May of this year, Celeyta and Senator Lopez Maya received information of very specific reconnaissance of Senator Maya's daily activity and a plot of how to successfully follow and assassinate the Senator. This information was confirmed by a subsequent police raid. Ms. Celeyta has repeatedly received phone calls where she is subjected to the sound of rapid gunfire. Ms. Celeyta and the Senator have also received death threats in the form of an invitation to attend their funerals.

The document accusing Ms. Celeyta and others of being "narco-terrorists" is the latest in this series of threats.

These threats continue despite potential victims being enrolled in the U.S. funded human rights protection program. Despite the U.S.'s annual investment of hundreds of millions of dollars into Colombia, the Colombian people continue to live in fear due to the country's rampant impunity.

Berenice Celeyta Alayón will be available for comment.

The RFK Memorial (www.rfkmemorial.org) is an activist organization dedicated to Robert F. Kennedy's vision of creating a more peaceful and just world. For almost 40 years the RFK Memorial has worked to advance the human rights movement through partnering with courageous grassroots defenders like Berenice Celeyta Alayón from around the world who have won the RFK Human Rights Award.

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) is a non-profit policy, research and advocacy organization working to advance democracy, human rights and social justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. WOLA plays a leading role in Washington policy debates about Latin America. WOLA facilitates dialogue between governmental and non-governmental actors, monitors the impact of policies and programs of government and international organizations, and promotes alternatives through reporting, education, training and advocacy.

Source: Robert F. Kennedy Memorial (www.rfkmemorial.org) and Washington Office on Latin America (www.wola.org)