

August 23, 2016
Luis Carlos Villegas
Minister of Defense
Carrera 54 N° 26 – 25 CAN,
Bogotá, Colombia

Dear Minister Villegas,

As U.S. nongovernmental organizations, faith-based organizations, and human rights advocates who follow closely developments in Colombia, we write to express our serious concern about alleged violent actions by the Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios (ESMAD) during peaceful protests. Over the past year, most notably during the historic national strike by Afro-descendant organizations, agrarian organizations and Colombia's National Indigenous Organization (ONIC) and the recent truckers strike, we have monitored with concern reports of the extensive use of excessive force that includes beatings, the use of stun grenades and the shooting of rubber bullets.

We would like to call to your attention recent examples of use of excessive force reported to our organizations and in the international media.

- According to a [recent report](#) by a nongovernmental human rights commission that monitored protest in Boyacá, 21 arbitrary arrests, threats, and injuries occurred during the first 39 days of the truckers strike.
- On July 29, members of the Union Sindical Obrera (USO) union [reported](#) that they were assaulted by ESMAD during a peaceful protest.
- On July 12 Luis Orlando Saiz [died](#) in Duitama, Boyacá while protesting. According to eye-witness testimonies, a tear gas grenade was thrown directly at his head.
- On July 11, Naimen Lara died during protest over closure of a hospital in Chiriguaná, Cesar. [According to reports by Caracol](#), members of the ESMAD shot Mr. Lara three times in the back.
- On June 3, an Afro-Colombian leader reported the use of disturbing racist slurs by ESMAD forces during the national agrarian strike.
- On June 2, Gersain Cerón and Marco Aurelio Díaz Ulcué [were killed](#) during a protest in Pital, Cauca. [According to a report in El Herald, indigenous protestors blamed the government. The incident is still under investigation.](#)
- On May 30, Willington Quibarecama Naquirucama [died](#) after an ESMAD tank ran him over. This took place on the first day of the national agrarian strike.
- On April 27, protestors in Cauca [reported](#) excessive use of force that led to multiple injuries. Two children, including a 3-week old baby, were harmed.

As the Colombian government continues to engage in peace negotiations with the FARC-EP in Havana, Cuba, we find this deeply concerning. Many recent social protests have resulted in the injury or death of protesters. One key to a sustainable peace and a flourishing democracy is the ability of all Colombians, including those in the political opposition and social movements, to engage safely in social protest. Rather than violence, it is important that the Colombian government choose peaceful means, including dialogue, to respond to the specific and legitimate demands that protesters make. The appropriate handling of protest and of violations by ESMAD will set a precedent for the post-peace accord era that Colombia will soon enter.

We therefore urge your Ministry to adopt strict policies for officer behavior in protest that respect the rights to free speech, to freedom of assembly, and to life, and robust training on such policies. We urge the Ministry, of course, to cooperate fully with efforts by the Attorney General's office to investigate all allegations of gross human rights abuses committed by the ESMAD and sanction those responsible for misconduct. We also urge your Ministry to ensure appropriate disciplinary measures for those who violate policies for appropriate conduct in responding to protest.

We thank you in advance for your attention and look forward to receiving your response regarding this important matter.

Sincerely,

WOLA (Washington Office on Latin America)

The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Latin America Working Group (LAWG)

International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights

Brian Finnegan
Global Worker Rights Coordinator
AFL-CIO

Cristina Espinel
Co-Chair
Colombia Human Rights Committee

Daniel Kovalik
Associate General Counsel
United Steel Workers (USW)

Neida Perez
Co-Chair
Colombia Human Rights Committee

Margot Worfolk
Board Chair, Chicago
Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)