

Michael Richard Pence  
Vice President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

April 12, 2018

Re: Threat to security and stability of peace accord implementation and U.S. policy goals in Colombia posed by assassinations of community leaders

Dear Mr. Vice President:

As you prepare for your visit to the Summit of the Americas in Lima, Peru this week, we urge you to address the astoundingly high number of assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders (HRDs) in Colombia. Tragedies in their own right, these killings and abuses pose a grave risk to Colombia's progress towards peace and stability, even threatening U.S. counter-narcotics efforts and democracy. The U.S. has played a vital role in securing peace in Colombia and the inclusion of the Ethnic Chapter, which guarantees the rights of minority groups in the accord. We urge you to convey a clear message to President Juan Manuel Santos and Colombian officials that these killings adversely affect U.S.-Colombia national security interests.

**Since the beginning of 2018, on average a community leader or human rights defender has been killed every 48 hours in Colombia.** The country has one of the highest global rates of murder of human rights defenders and journalists and there has been no justice in over 90 percent of these cases. Threats against these leaders undermine their ability to play a vital accountability role in documenting human rights abuses related to corruption and trafficking. Weakening these communities cedes control to paramilitary forces, narco-traffickers and corrupt elements in Colombia's security forces, this ultimately undermines Colombia's fragile peace and over 20 years of U.S. investments to achieve security and stability.

An estimated 30 human rights defenders have been killed just in the past two and a half months; a disproportionate number are indigenous and Afro-Colombian. During the month of March 2018 alone, at least ten indigenous and Afro-Colombian activists, community leaders, and human rights defenders were murdered for their work. As an example, the civil society organization National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) which has already lost multiple leaders to murders continues to be under attack. Former AFRODES leader Bernardo Cuero was assassinated in front of his wife in June 2017, despite international pleas by the U.S. Congress, Organization of American States and others, that the National Protection Unit (UNP) protects him. Quite the opposite occurred. The UNP actually withdrew its protection for Cuero, who was subsequently killed. On March 23, Cuero's sons, Silvio Duban Ortiz Ortiz and Javier Bernardo Cuero Ortiz, were also shot dead.

Despite the tragic number of social leaders assassinated, it is important to remain optimistic about the prospects for peace. The historic peace agreement between Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) includes multiple transformative changes that open the opportunity for Colombia to address the root causes of violence, conflict and drug trafficking. If properly implemented with continued U.S. support, these accords can serve to protect social leaders and organizations gone silent in the face of violence and threats and give them a voice in Colombia's new democracy.

We respectfully ask that you raise the following issues with President Santos and urge him to take steps to address them:

- The ongoing killings of social leaders including Afro-Colombian internally displaced people (IDP) leaders who form part of AFRODES and their family members is a serious threat to peace and stability. Please urge President Santos to guarantee swift justice in these cases.
- In accordance with Decree 2078 of 7 December 2017, as well as the Ethnic Chapter, the Colombian government should ensure the inclusion of ethnic and cultural perspectives in security arrangements. Two practical examples would be the inclusion of Indigenous and Cimarron Guards (Guardia Indígena y Cimarron) in the protection response and training members of the indigenous communities and women to act as bodyguards for the protection mechanism.
- Call on the Colombian authorities to speed-up the implementation on the ground of collective measures that fall under the Plan for Collective Protection (Ministry of the Interior Resolution 1085 which includes “supporting infrastructure; organizational and community strengthening; improving the presence of governmental institutions; legal and administrative measures,” again with a differentiated focus for gender and ethnicity).
- Urge the Colombian government to dismantle paramilitary successor groups, including by ensuring the unit to dismantle organized crime and paramilitary successor groups is effectively functioning.

Security, stability and the respect of human rights for the Colombian people is in the national security interest of both the United States and Colombia. Sustainable peace will only be possible when Colombian social leaders are fully able to participate in strengthening the country’s institutions and rule of law.

Sincerely,

Afro-Colombian Solidarity Network (ACSN)  
AFRODES International  
Amazon Watch  
Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America  
Colombia Grassroots support  
Colombia Human Rights Committee  
Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)  
Freedom House  
Latin American Working Group (LAWG)  
MADRE  
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office  
Movement for Peace in Colombia  
Presbyterian Peace Fellowship  
Priority Africa Network, Oakland-SF Bay Area  
The Human Rights and Gender Justice (HRGJ) Clinic  
The International Institute on Race, Equality, and Human Rights (Race and Equality)  
UNIAFRO

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

Andrew Morehouse

Anthony Dest, PhD Candidate, University of Texas

Catalina Martinez, Latin America Analyst - Forest Campaign, Environmental Investigation Agency

Daniel Kovalik, Senior Associate General Counsel of the United Steelworkers, AFL-CIO

Dr. Sheila Gruner, CESD, Algoma University

Jonathan Fox, American University, School of International Service

Joseph Jordan, Director, The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History

Juan Rivera, Director Yoruba Cuba Association

Michael Quintero, Assistant Professor of Musicology & Ethnomusicology, Latin American Studies, and African American Studies, Boston University

The Rev. Barbara Gerlach, Retired Minister, Advocate for Colombia's Displaced

Willie Baker, President Emeritus, Coalition of Black Trade Unionist (CBTU)

Cc: The Honorable John J. Sullivan, Deputy Secretary of State/Acting Secretary of State  
The Honorable Kevin Whitaker United States Ambassador to Colombia