



# human rights *first*

George W. Bush  
President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

August 3, 2005

Dear President Bush:

We are writing to urge you to use the upcoming visit of President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia to raise concerns about the Colombian government's treatment of human rights defenders in Colombia. We also urge you to seek assurances that members of paramilitary groups who have committed human rights violations are held accountable for their actions.

Human Rights First has welcomed your support of those who work to promote human rights and basic freedoms around the world, notably in your second inaugural address, and in several other important speeches. We therefore hope that you will focus particular attention on several comments made by President Uribe which seriously undermine human rights defenders in Colombia, and put them at greater risk.

In a speech delivered in September 2003 during a celebration to honor the new Air Force commander, General Edgar Lesmez, President Uribe accused human rights organizations of "serving terrorism and cowardly hiding behind the human rights flag." In a subsequent speech before the European Parliament in February 2004 President Uribe made reference to the human rights organization, the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyer's Collective, stating that "human rights should not be used to cover up terrorist actions." During a promotion ceremony for Colombian police in June of last year, the President made sweeping accusations against Amnesty International, stating that it "legitimizes terrorism" and erroneously accusing the organization of failing to condemn human rights violations by guerilla insurgents.

Statements like these from President Uribe and other leaders of the Colombian government have exacerbated existing risks faced by rights defenders, risks which are already formidable. The Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) reports that since 1996, more than 118 human rights defenders in Colombia were murdered or "disappeared," including at least 16 last year. According to the reports of credible Colombian human rights organizations and U.N. monitors present on the ground, the majority of these attacks were carried out by paramilitaries, many of whom are under the direction of or act in close association with the government's regular armed forces

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Nongovernmental human rights organizations in Colombia continue to monitor violations of human rights in that country, and to expose and comment on the shortcomings in the government's actions. Because of these legitimate, peaceful and indeed essential activities, which characterize the work of human rights activists everywhere, Colombian officials, including President Uribe, have gone out of their way to try to undermine, invalidate, and ultimately to silence many members of Colombia's human rights community.

The immediate consequence of these public criticisms is to put lives at risk. By publicly challenging the legitimacy of human rights organizations, the Colombian government undermines the credibility of their work and reports and leaves the victims of human rights violations whose interests they seek to represent without protection.

We also urge you to reinforce the importance of holding members of paramilitary groups accountable for serious human rights violations. Over the last two years, more than half a million people have become newly-displaced, and more than 6,000 have died or "disappeared" in non-combat situations. According to data collected by the CCJ, about three-quarters of these violations have been committed by paramilitaries and acknowledged state agents, and another 25 percent by guerrilla groups. Paramilitaries are also disproportionately responsible for attacks against human rights defenders and nongovernmental organizations.

We are therefore concerned that the structure for demobilizing paramilitaries set forward in the "Justice and Peace" bill adopted earlier this month will make it virtually impossible to hold paramilitaries accountable for human rights violations and will leave the structures of these illegal armed groups intact. Nothing in the demobilization plan will prevent the Colombian military from continuing to engage in these practices that have resulted in prolonged instability and massive violations of human rights.

We strongly urge you to raise these issues of impunity and accountability during your time with President Uribe, and ask that you demand assurances from him that paramilitaries guilty of gross human rights violations – including attacks against human rights defenders – be brought to justice, including requiring that they completely and truthfully confess their crimes and make adequate reparations to their victims.

In your second inaugural address you declared to human rights activists everywhere: "When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you." Colombian human rights defenders will be looking to you to put these words into action in Crawford. Your meeting in Crawford affords the best opportunity to unequivocally denounce the attacks against the human rights community in Colombia, and to raise critical issues regarding accountability of Colombian paramilitaries implicated in serious human rights violations.

We thank you for your attention to his important matter.

Sincerely,



Michael H. Posner  
Executive Director