



## **Human Rights Defenders in the Crosshairs:**

### **The Ongoing Crisis in Colombia**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing, October 20, 2009**

#### **Testimony by Andrew Hudson, Human Rights First**

Mr Chairman,

Around the world, Human Rights First protects human rights activists who are attacked for defending the rights of others. For many years we have focused on Colombia as a country with particularly high levels of persecution against defenders. As the last witness today, I will briefly summarize some key themes that have emerged in this hearing and present some recommendations for Congress.

Today we have heard compelling evidence from a UN expert and two Colombian human rights activists about the reality on the ground in Colombia. (As an aside we are delighted that Gabriel Gonzalez is here today and thank you Chairman McGovern for helping him obtain a visa to come the US. Human Rights First is honoring Gonzalez with its 2009 annual human rights award in recognition of his brave human rights advocacy and the harrowing baseless prosecution he continues to suffer.)

All speakers have voiced serious concerns about patterns of harassment against Colombian human rights activists. All speakers have described how Colombian activists are subject to the full gamut of human rights violations including killings, torture, threats, misuse of state intelligence, systematic stigmatization, unfounded criminal proceedings and impunity for violations against defenders. Most shockingly as the Special Rapporteur concluded, activists are targeted "because of their legitimate work in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Human Rights First welcomes the statement by Colombian President Uribe on 17 September 2009 after his meeting with the Special Rapporteur that, "The defense of human rights is a necessary and legitimate action for democracy in a country like Colombia which is proud to be completely open to international scrutiny in this field". We hope that this will signal an end to his dangerous stigmatization of human rights defenders as terrorists. We also welcome the constructive relationship we have forged with various Colombian institutions in particular to close baseless criminal charges against Colombian defenders.

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In February this year, HRF testified before this Commission and released a comprehensive report documenting how trumped-up criminal charges are used to silence and stigmatize defenders. Six months later, only one defender in the report remains imprisoned, Carmelo Agamez. Sadly, however, many more defenders have subsequently been unfairly detained in those intervening months.

As a source of approximately \$500 million in annual aid to Colombia, the US can and must play a role in addressing the problems we have heard today. We have the following recommendations for Congress:

1. US Congress should include in appropriations legislation a condition requiring certification by the State department that Colombia is not violating the rights of defenders (a provision to this effect is in the draft Appropriations Bill and we urge that it be retained in the final Act).
2. The US Department of Justice should be a key ally for defenders in Colombia by ensuring that its significant judicial reform aid is being used to defend those upholding the rule of law in Colombia. The US Congress should increase oversight of DOJ (through reporting requirements and budget hearings) to determine how DOJ is ending impunity for violations against defenders, the misuse of state intelligence and unfounded criminal proceedings.
3. As Gonzalez's 4 months visa delay demonstrates, there is a desperate need for Congress to overhaul so-called "administrative processing" procedures so that legitimate human rights defenders can obtain visas in a reasonable amount of time.
4. We also recommend that members of Congress encourage US foreign policy to Colombia to adopt the detailed [recommendations](#) contained in the international campaign for the right to defend human rights (copies of these recommendations are available at this hearing).

Thank you.