



February 12, 2007

Ambassador William B Wood
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Dear Ambassador Wood,

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Recent Serious Attacks against Human Rights Defenders

Human Rights First writes to express its concern and to seek your intervention with the Colombian authorities with respect to a number of recent disturbing attacks against prominent human rights defenders in Colombia.

1. Killing of Yolanda Izquierdo Berrio

As you are no doubt aware, on January 31, 2007 Yolanda Izquierdo Berrio was shot dead outside her home in Monteria, Cordoba department. According to a police report, Ms Izquierdo was shot by two men on a motorcycle who are suspected of being linked to paramilitary groups. The killing has been widely criticized including by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹

Ms Izquierdo was Cordoba coordinator for the *Organizacion Popular de Vivienda* (OPV) an organization that helps displaced people to find housing. Ms Izquierdo had recently filed formal complaints on behalf of hundreds of families accusing paramilitary groups of illegally seizing their land in the 1990s. She was also representing these families at the demobilization hearings, held under the 2005 Justice and Peace Law, of the paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso. Mancuso was leader of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), the principal paramilitary group in Cordoba responsible for forcibly dispossessing the majority of families that Ms Izquierdo represented. She had also been seeking maps, certificates and deeds to demonstrate that her clients were forcibly dispossessed of their lands by the AUC.

¹ IACHR, *Press Release: IACHR Expresses its Condemnation of the Murder of Victim Seeking Reparation under the Justice and Peace Law in Colombia*, No 4/07 (February 2, 2007); UNHCHR Office in Colombia, *Condena por la muerte violenta de Yolanda Izquierdo Berrio*, (1 de febrero de 2007).

Ms Izquierdo had received numerous death threats in December of 2006 and January 2007. She reported the threats to the Attorney-General's office and repeatedly asked for protection from the authorities.. However, she was not provided with any form of protection. Moreover, Ms Izquierdo's death was not isolated. On January 28, 2007, Freddy Abel Espitia, was also killed. He was President of the Committee for Displaced Persons in Cotorra, (also in Cordoba department) and likewise representing victims of the AUC. In these circumstances, it appears highly likely that Ms Izquierdo was targeted and killed because of her human rights advocacy on behalf of paramilitary victims.

The killing of Ms Izquierdo is particularly disturbing because:

- it appears aimed at intimidating and deterring other victims and their representatives from participating in the important Justice and Peace Law process, thereby preventing them from telling the truth about violations committed by paramilitary forces;
- the Interior Ministry had not provided Ms Izquierdo any form of protection despite the repeated threats against her; her repeated requests for such protection; and the recent killing of another human rights defender in a similar situation;
- if not adequately addressed, it has the potential to undermine the credibility of the important paramilitary demobilization process.

2. Email Death Threats against Organizations after President Uribe's Statements

On February 3 2007, President Uribe made some alarming comments about key members of the Opposition. President Uribe said some of them "went from being terrorists in camouflage to terrorists in business suits".² The comments seemed aimed at members of Senator Gustavo Petro's opposition Alternative Democratic Pole party who have been calling for further investigations into paramilitary infiltration of the Colombian government. President Uribe has previously made similar comments about human rights defenders which delegitimizes and stigmatizes them. Moreover, such comments increase their vulnerability, especially in the context of Colombia's armed conflict. Using the language of terrorism portrays the individuals concerned as legitimate targets and suggests "that acts of violence aimed at suppressing [them] enjoy the acquiescence of the government."³

The connection between the President's statements and direct threats of violence against human rights defenders is apparent in that two days after President Uribe's comment, an email containing death threats was sent to approximately 70 of Colombia's leading human rights defenders and organizations such as Ivan Cepeda, *la Comission por justicia y paz*, MINGA, ONIC, and CODHES. The email was apparently sent from ex-members of the AUC, who now

² Words of the President at Tierradentro, Montelibano (Córdoba), *Nosotros No Podemos Tener Un Ejército Enfrascado En Discusiones Teóricas Internas y Derrotado En El Territorio* (February 3 2007) available in Spanish at: http://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa_new/sne/2007/febrero/03/04032007.htm

³ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas*, Doc: OEA/Ser.L/V/II.124 (7 March 2006) 48.

refer to themselves as the “new generation of paramilitary: black eagles”. The email identified itself with President Uribe’s policies and borrowed significantly from his statement two days earlier. For example, it used the phrase “camouflaged as civilians”. The email contained a series of death threats and intimidatory language against the recipients. Human Rights First is alarmed that President Uribe’s sweeping rhetoric contributes to a climate of increased danger for human rights defenders in Colombia.

3. Action the United States Government Should Take

These serious attacks against human rights defenders breach a number of the NGO Principles announced by Secretary Rice on December 14 2006. Secretary Rice stated that that United States government would “urge other governments to respect” these principles. In particular, principle 3 states that “NGOs should be permitted to carry out their peaceful work in a hospitable environment free from fear of harassment, reprisal, intimidation and discrimination.”

As a way of responding to these serious attacks, Human Rights First calls upon you to:

1. Make public statements condemning: (1) the recent murders of Ms Izquierdo and other human rights defenders; (2) the email death threats against human rights defenders.
2. Express concern about the apparent connection between President Uribe’s comments that conflate non-violent critics of his policies with terrorists, and direct threats made against human rights defenders.
3. Make public statements recognizing the legitimacy and importance of the work performed by Colombian human rights defenders.
4. Urge President Uribe and other senior government figures to desist from making inflammatory statements that may encourage attacks against human rights defenders.
5. Urge President Uribe and other senior government figures to make public comments recognizing the legitimacy and importance of the work performed by human rights defenders.
6. Call for a prompt, impartial and thorough investigation into the recent murders of Ms Izquierdo and other human rights defenders and the email death threats. And closely monitor the progress of such investigations.
7. Call for the Ministry of the Interior to provide adequate protection to victims and their representatives involved in the Justice and Peace Law process (for example the *Cooperativa de Agricultores de Blanquicet* (COOTRAGROBLAN) en Turbo municipality);⁴

⁴ See letter from Comision Colombiana de Juristas to Mario Iguaran Arana, Fiscal General de la Nacion, (February 1 2007) available at www.coljuristas.org

I also draw your attention to the recent letter sent by members of Congress to the Secretary of State on December 14, 2006, (attached) which specifically asked you and the State Department to urge the Colombian government:

- (1) to thoroughly investigate and prosecute threats and attacks against human rights defenders;
- (2) to make consistent public statements supporting the legitimacy and importance of the work carried out by human rights defenders; and
- (3) to improve the protection program for human rights defenders; and
- (4) to investigate re-emerging paramilitary groups.

Human Rights First is confident that your intervention in these cases, as outlined above, and in accordance with the U.S. government's commitment to "defend the defenders," reaffirmed by Secretary Rice on December 14, would be beneficial to Colombian human rights defenders, and would be much appreciated by them.

Sincerely,



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Cc

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