



human rights *first*

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Dr. Mario Iguarán
Fiscal General de Colombia
Diagonal 22B No. 52-01
Bogota D.C., Colombia

HEADQUARTERS
333 Seventh Avenue
13th Floor
New York, NY 10001
Tel: 212.845.5200
Fax: 212.845.5299

WASHINGTON D.C. OFFICE
100 Maryland Avenue, N.E.
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20002
Tel: 202.547.5692
Fax: 202.543.5999

www.humanrightsfirst.org

Dear Attorney General:

Baseless Prosecutions of Human Rights Defenders

We, the below-signed 1,777 individuals, join Human Rights First in writing to express our concern over the use of baseless criminal prosecutions against human rights defenders in Colombia. We urge you to immediately release from detention human defenders such as Martin Sandoval, Carmelo Agamez, Miguel Gonzalez, and Andres Gil and to implement systemic reforms as suggested in Human Rights First's new report.

The report, *Baseless Prosecutions of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia: In the Dock and Under the Gun*, documents 32 recent cases of unfounded prosecutions against defenders. It also contains a comprehensive accounting of the use of prosecutions and criminal investigations against defenders, based on detailed analysis of court documents and interviews with government officials and human rights defenders. Some examples of the many defenders investigated for their human rights advocacy are Martin Sandoval, President of the Permanent Committee of Human Rights in Arauca, currently detained and accused of rebellion; Carmelo Agamez, Technical Secretary of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE), currently detained and accused of conspiracy to commit a crime with paramilitary forces; and Miguel Gonzalez and Andres Gil, board members of the Rural Association of Rio Valle del Rio Cimitarra (ACVC), currently detained and accused of rebellion.

There are many similarities in the baseless prosecutions of defenders. They are usually accused of rebellion and membership in a guerrilla group and stigmatized as terrorist collaborators. Prosecutors often rely on coached and unreliable testimony by ex-guerrillas and inadmissible intelligence files. The politically motivated charges discredit and stigmatize human rights defenders

individually and as a class, and place them at considerable risk of reprisal attacks by paramilitaries and others. The baseless prosecution of defenders undermines the basic rights and freedoms of individuals, erodes due process, and weakens democratic institutions in Colombia.

We are concerned that the Colombian government has provided the context for these unfounded prosecutions. For example, this month the Colombian President and Defense Minister publicly claimed that renowned human rights investigator and journalist Hollman Morris was “[hiding] behind his journalism to become a permissive accomplice of terrorism.” Shortly after these false claims, Morris received many death threats and is now considering leaving the country. You have stated that, at the request of the government, you would open a criminal investigation into Morris for alleged ties to terrorism. We are aware of no evidence linking Morris to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and urge you to immediately close this investigation.

In addition to curtailing their rhetoric, the Colombian authorities have a responsibility to implement systemic reforms. Instead of instigating more false investigations against human rights defenders, we urge you to take immediate action to stop the problem, including:

- 1) empowering your human rights unit to review all criminal investigations against human rights defenders and close those that fail to comport with the due process standards contained in the Colombian Criminal Procedural Code;
- 2) stopping prosecutorial use of coerced and coached witness testimony as a basis to initiate criminal investigations against defenders; and
- 3) prosecuting officials found to have violated the law in falsely investigating human rights defenders.

Thank you for your attention to these urgent matters. We will continue to closely monitor these situations.

The names of the 1,777 signatories have been removed for privacy reasons.