

*And the work of righteousness shall be peace;
and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.
Isaiah 32.17*

Honorable Members of the United States Congress
Washington, D. C.

Dear Members of Congress:

We, the undersigned, are U.S. and Colombian people of faith, convinced that God calls us to be on the side of the weak, the victims and the poor. For this reason, as representatives of numerous faith communities and churches, we come to you because we understand that soon you will consider two pieces of legislation that would have a significant impact on Colombia—U.S. military and social assistance through Plan Colombia and the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. We write in the hope that your decisions may build the foundation for dignified life for all and promote the justice and peace that we so desire.

For more than 50 years Colombia has suffered through armed conflict, violence, inequalities and injustices. The civilian population is most affected by the armed conflict. More than four million people have been displaced from their lands. This conflict kills more than 3,000 people annually and tens of thousands of paramilitary and guerrilla victims today call for truth, justice and reparations. Meanwhile, the United Nations indicates that more than 45 percent of the Colombian population lives in poverty.

We have closely followed the congressional debates regarding human rights in Colombia and the balance between U.S. military and social aid for Colombia. We applauded Congress' achievement last year when you cut \$142 million in military aid and added \$97 million in social aid to the aid package. We know that this year President George Bush has once again called on Congress to pass an aid package with approximately 75 percent in military aid. We, who work with the victims of the conflict or accompany them from the United States, hope that Congress prioritizes work for peace and socio-economic assistance rather than military aid.

At the same time, we know that Congress may soon consider the ratification of the Free Trade Agreement negotiated between Colombia and the United States. Being faithful to our principles, we must view any public policy from the point of view of the poor and the victims. Therefore, in Colombia we must consider how the trade agreement would affect what the United Nations estimates are the close to nine million Colombians living in rural areas—the family farmer, the indigenous and the Afro-Colombians—80 percent of whom live in poverty, according to USAID.

According to the United Nations, 21 percent of employed Colombians work in agriculture, the vast majority in rural areas. Research on the impact of free trade agreements between underdeveloped countries, such as Colombia, and countries with large economies, such as the United States, show that underdeveloped countries lose a significant number of agricultural jobs. For example, independent studies indicate that in Mexico at least 1.3 million family farmers have been displaced from their agricultural production due to subsidized imports from the United States.

While in Mexico many of these family farmers have attempted to survive by migrating into the United States, in Colombia there would be a risk of increasing the number of internally displaced persons, a population that is already the second largest in the world. We are deeply concerned that the livelihood of the rural population—individuals who have already suffered greatly from the consequences of the armed conflict—would be further put at risk by this trade agreement. This population could then face decisions that have historically reproduced violence and poverty in Colombia: migration to urban settings, forced internal displacement, illicit crop production, recruitment by illegal armed groups, among other ill-fated consequences.

We are also concerned that the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement would put Colombians' food security at risk, as the country would, in large part, be dependent on U.S. imports for basic grains and other key foods for daily consumption. Furthermore, this trade agreement does not have sufficient protection for workers nor the environment. Such labor protections are particularly important in Colombia, the country with the highest number of murdered trade unionists. And without necessary environmental protections in the agreement, we would be jeopardizing Colombia's environment, considered the second most bio-diverse in the world.

For that reason, we ask you, honorable members of Congress, to take into account the following requests before considering the proposed aid to Colombia or the ratification of the free trade agreement.

- **Further cut U.S. military aid and aerial fumigation, which does not bring us closer to peace in Colombia, while significantly increasing aid for the poor, the displaced, refugees and the victims of the armed conflict.**
- **Insist that the State Department strongly enforce the human rights conditions in law, which is especially important as we are seeing a concerning increase in killings of civilians as well as other human rights violations attributed to the Colombian Armed Forces.**
- **Do not ratify a U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which would increase the already concerning poverty rate among rural Colombians, would put Colombia's food security at risk and lacks sufficient protections for workers and Colombia's bio-diverse environment.**

Esteemed members of Congress, we ask that you consider our concerns in order to find the authentic paths for justice and peace for Colombia, the United States and the world.

Sincerely,