

## **Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs; Sub-Committee on Human Rights, Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

Sophie Haspelslagh, Programme and Advocacy Manager, ABColombia

Distinguished members of the Sub-Committee on Human Rights, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to have the opportunity to address you this afternoon on behalf of the Colombian and International Campaign for the Right to Defend Human Rights in Colombia. The Campaign has mobilised a very broad range of organisations and individuals from Colombian civil society together with more than 200 international organisations.

In Ireland, ABColombia, Trócaire, Christian Aid, Front Line, the Latin American Solidarity Committee and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions have all joined forces to support this campaign. When we first presented the campaign in Dublin at the end of October 2009, Senator Ivor Callely kindly invited us to make a presentation to the Sub-Committee on the situation faced by human rights defenders in Colombia.

In Colombia being a human rights defender is a dangerous, often deadly job. Colombian civil society is vibrant and active but many of its members carry out their work in defence of human rights in a climate of fear. They continue to be at very serious risk from killings, disappearances, violent attacks, arbitrary detention, fabricated prosecutions, harassment, death threats, defamation and intrusive surveillance. Discussions with these courageous human rights defenders echo the five main recommendations of our joint campaign.

### **End the misuse of state intelligence**

Many human rights defenders have obtained copies of documents detailing the surveillance undertaken by the Colombian intelligence agency DAS (Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad) against them. It is clear from this evidence that there was a systematic strategy to target, threaten and seek to silence human rights defenders. Bodyguards provided by the state for human rights defenders at immediate risk are implicated in gathering intelligence to be used against them. Many international human rights organisations are also named in the files. Front Line was named in one of the documents from 2004 because they were trying to help protect one of their targets.

The organisation Yessika Hoyos works for, José Alvear Restrepo Lawyer's Collective (CAJAR), has been particularly targeted. The Attorney General's office found over 5,000 pages of information on CAJAR lawyers and their family members. The actions carried out by the DAS were not limited to surveillance. In 2005 a CAJAR lawyer, Soraya Gutierrez, received a bloody doll accompanied by a note saying "You have a pretty daughter. Don't sacrifice her". Based on recent information released in the DAS files, CAJAR now believes that the doll and the death threat were sent by the DAS.

### **End systematic stigmatisation**

Government representatives from the President down repeatedly equate human rights defenders with terrorists and guerrillas in what is perceived to be an encouragement of attacks against them. Those human rights defenders who are most vulnerable are often those working in rural areas. Human rights defenders from Putamayo, Casanare, Meta,

Arauca, Caquetá, Cauca and Nariño repeatedly tell us how the military refers to them as terrorists, communists and traitors, and that this is echoed in the death threats that come in pamphlets from the paramilitaries.

### **End unfounded criminal proceedings**

The recipient of a human rights award, Principe Gabriel Gonzalez of the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (CSPP), recently spent 15 months in prison on trumped up charges. This is part of a pattern of fabricated prosecutions of human rights defenders, often with evidence from supposedly demobilised guerrillas or paramilitaries. Even when the testimony clearly lacks credibility and is unsubstantiated it can result in long periods of detention before a court looks seriously at it. Human Rights First published a report in February this year that documented in detail 32 such cases and the pattern is continuing.

### **Structurally improve the protection programs for people at risk**

In theory it is great that the Colombian Government provides protection programs for human rights defenders at risk. Unfortunately they have not always been very effective and as mentioned already some of the bodyguards and drivers provided have been implicated in collecting information to be used against those they were supposed to protect. In some cases those who are responsible for carrying out risk assessments are also those believed to be the perpetrators of the persecution. The process is also slow and under-resourced. Human rights defenders in the program still get killed. Ever González from the Comité de Integración del Macizo Colombiano was killed on 20 September 2008 whilst investigating the increasing numbers of extrajudicial executions in the department of Cauca.

### **End impunity for violations against human rights defenders**

Crucially linked to all the demands is the campaign's call for an end to impunity for those who attack human rights defenders. Official investigations of threats against human rights defenders are almost non-existent. Mauricio Meza Blanco, a Trócaire partner in Bucaramanga (Santander Department), has been the victim of two attempted kidnappings in 2009 as a result of his human rights work on behalf of local people affected by a large-scale hydroelectric project. There has been no serious effort to bring those responsible to justice.

Distinguished members, I would encourage you to go to Colombia for yourselves and to meet with these very courageous human rights defenders who continue their work on behalf of others in spite of the dangers they face.