

Rt Hon Sir
Alan Duncan MP
UK Minister of State
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

20 December 2017

Dear Minister Duncan,

ABColumbia, the joint advocacy project on Colombia for CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, SCIAF and Trócaire, is writing to you to raise profound concerns regarding the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Colombia. We are asking that you ensure a statement is made at the UN Security Council regarding the extremely high-levels of killings of Colombian HRDs when the next report of the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council on the mandate of the Verification Mission to Colombia is received, due on 26 December 2017; and that the UK strongly requests the Colombian Government to officially invite Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, to Colombia.

Firstly, we would like to congratulate the UK Government on the achievement of UN Security Council Resolutions 2261 (2016) and 2366 (2017), for which Her Majesty's Government held the pen. The two political missions (UN Verification Missions) have been crucial in monitoring and verifying the Colombian Peace Process with the FARC, and more recently the ceasefire with the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) guerrilla.

The mandate for the UN Verification Mission in Colombia is based on sections 3.2 and 3.4 as called for in section 6.3.3 of the Final Peace Agreement, which includes monitoring and verifying "comprehensive security and protection programmes for the communities and organisations across the country..." (Final Agreement 3.4).

Since the signing of the Peace Agreement, we have seen an escalation in the number of attacks and killings of HRDs along with evidence of a systematic pattern in the profiles of the HRDs being killed, namely, leaders associated with activities in defence of land and the environment, and those working on the implementation of the Peace Agreement in rural areas. According to the UN Refugee Agency, 78 HRDs were killed in Colombia between 1 January and 17 November 2017. There is evidence to show that many of those opposing land restitution to the victims of the conflict are former paramilitaries or powerful landowning families who benefit from local systemic corruption and rely on neo-paramilitary groups to obstruct the land claims processes.

In November 2017, Jeffrey Feltman, UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, expressed his deep concern regarding the reported vacuums of authority in many areas of Colombia and the resultant insecurity for communities. He recognised these as the areas where social leaders were being targeted and killed. Feltman points out that the "authorities themselves confirmed rising levels of violence".

The mandate approved at the UN Security Council includes monitoring of "security and protection programmes for communities and organisations". The UK played a pivotal role in obtaining this. ABColumbia therefore considers it essential that a statement is made on the highly vulnerable situation for HRDs in Colombia when the next report of the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council on the mandate of the Verification Mission to Colombia is received; this is due on 26 December 2017.

As Christmas approaches, our partners in Colombia are becoming increasingly concerned, since this is traditionally the time of the year when a spike in violence is experienced. Urgent prevention measures by the Colombian Government are essential, alongside a longer-term approach to ensure the dismantling of the financial and political structures behind the illegal armed groups, referred to in the Peace Agreement as “successors to paramilitaries.” At the same time, it is crucial to conduct investigations into the relationship between third-party economic interests and attacks on HRDs working on land restitution and peace issues.

The peace process in Colombia has achieved important milestones in a short space of time, despite facing fierce opposition; but the reality that HRDs experience every day must be faced if we are to have any chance of addressing this violence. We are concerned that a failure to tackle this could further weaken public support for the already fragile peace process.

ABColombia therefore asks that the UK Government ensures that a statement is made at the UN Security Council regarding the extremely high levels of attacks and killings of HRDs in Colombia, and that the Council’s grave concern is expressed.

In addition, we would ask you to request specific monitoring and reporting on the situation of HRDs under section 3.4.8. of the Final Agreement, which provides the mandate for the verification of the “comprehensive security and protection programmes for the communities and organisations”; and that this should be included, as a specific item, in future reports of the UN Verification Mission to the Security Council.

ABColombia would further ask that the UK Government strongly requests the Colombian Government to officially invite Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, to Colombia.

Yours sincerely,



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On Behalf of:

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cc: H.E. Peter Tibber, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Republic of Colombia; Nigel Baker, Head of South America Department & Deputy Director of the Americas, Tom Newton, British Embassy, Kate Halliday, Head Andean Team, South America Department, FCO; Chris Moden, Colombia Desk Officer & Deputy Head Andean Team, FCO; Jeremy Hobbs, Americas Research Group, FCO