



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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Minister of State for
Europe and the Americas

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Louise Winstanley
ABColumbia
55 Westminster Bridge Road
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Dear Ms Winstanley,

Thank you for the letter of 20 December, about the situation facing human rights defenders in Colombia. I know you have a long standing and close relationship with our Embassy in Bogotá and with the Americas Directorate at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I share your concern about the increasing violence against human rights defenders (HRDs) in Colombia. As you mention in your letter, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has confirmed that 73 social leaders were killed last year. It is verifying a further 11 cases. A disproportionate number of those killed are linked to disputes concerning land restitution. Some also appear to have been targeted for speaking out for the rights of local and indigenous communities. Please be assured that our Embassy in Bogotá continues to monitor the situation on the ground closely.

As you know, Colombia is designated a Human Rights Priority Country by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and protection of human rights defenders is a priority focus for our work. I regularly raise violence against human rights defenders during my meetings with Colombian Ministers and the Colombian Ambassador. I discussed the situation with the Mariana Escobar, Head of the Agencia Nacional de Renovación del Territorio in November. She informed me that impunity for attacks will not be tolerated and that responsibility lies squarely with illegal armed groups such as Clan del Golfo. This is a direct challenge to the peace deal with the FARC secured by President Santos' Government.

I am proud of the UK's support to Colombia's peace process, using our voice at the UN Security Council and assistance through our bilateral Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) programmes. The UK has led negotiations on three UN Security Council resolutions enabling support to peace in Colombia during 2017. The UK also supported the drafting of Security Council statements about Colombia on 30 November and 10 January, which highlighted concerns about insecurity and violence against HRDs and community leaders. We do not believe a further statement about violence against HRDs by the UK would be right at this time.

Improving respect for human rights is vital for those living in vulnerable communities who should see the benefits of peace. That is why, in my statement on 20 December, I announced additional UK financial support to the peace process, including for the OHCHR in Colombia. I fully support a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders to Colombia; however, a visit would need to be at the invitation of the Colombian Government.

Finally, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office maintains a policy of working to support the right of human rights defenders to stand up for the human rights of their fellow citizens. The Foreign Secretary issued all Ambassadors with revised guidance on working to support human rights defenders last month. This guidance was the product of very constructive work with representatives of UK civil society. In November, the UK co-sponsored the UN resolution on human rights defenders at the UN General Assembly. We will continue to work with fellow co-sponsors and civil society to uphold the principles of the resolution.

May I assure you that my Ministerial colleagues and I will continue to raise our human rights concerns with Colombian counterparts, as will our Ambassador in Bogotá.

Yours sincerely,
Alan Duncan

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