

PRESS RELEASE

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The Obama Administration must consider major human rights concerns in its decisions over the pending FTA with Colombia

Today, a broad range of human rights, labor, environmental, development and faith-based organizations submitted written comments to the United States Trade Representative (USTR) calling on the Obama Administration to broaden the debate around the pending free trade agreement between the United States and Colombia. The organizations urge the administration to adopt a more comprehensive understanding of the human rights situation in Colombia, and work to resolve the underlying factors perpetuating the still high levels of violence and impunity in the country. The comments were filed in response to a formal request by USTR for views on the pending trade agreement.

“We welcome the USTR’s willingness to meet with our organizations and to listen to our concerns. We hope that our views will be given full consideration and reflected in the policy decisions that the government makes with regard to the FTA,” said Kelly Nicholls, Executive Director, U.S. Office on Colombia.

The organizations all strongly assert that violence against trade unionists continues to be an extremely serious problem in Colombia and that progress on this front must be made prior to any further discussion around the trade agreement. The organizations note that violence against trade unionists increased last year, with 49 union members assassinated, and that murders continue apace this year.

However, the groups also argue that the failure to restore rule of law in the country would allow crimes (and impunity for the perpetrators of those crimes) against trade unionists and human rights defenders, as well as Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, to persist. They argue that the rule of law cannot take root until, for example, the government: disbands remobilized paramilitaries and prosecutes politicians and business leaders who colluded with them; prosecutes those responsible for planning and carrying out illegal wiretapping of human rights defenders; and prosecutes public security forces who committed killings of civilians. They also emphasized the need for comprehensive reparations for those who have been victims of this violence – including the return of the 5.5 million hectares of illegally seized land.

“These issues are complex and will take some time to deal with appropriately. Meaningful resolution of these important problems should not be sacrificed in order to pass a trade agreement quickly,” said Lisa Haugaard, Executive Director, Latin America Working Group.

Further, several groups recommended that a number of FTA provisions should be renegotiated in light of their potential adverse effects on poverty and inequality in Colombia, which have fueled the internal armed conflict for over four decades and continue to spur illicit coca cultivation. For example, the agriculture provisions in the FTA could actually undermine rural development as the negotiations did not take into account existing disparities between the two countries.

“Many small-scale farmers in Colombia could lose their livelihoods due to increased imports of basic grains”, explained Stephanie Burgos, Senior Policy Advisor, Oxfam America. “This would exacerbate already high levels of poverty and inequality in the very regions most plagued by armed conflict and illicit drug cultivation. Indeed, inequality is the root of the over four decades old internal conflict in Colombia.”

“The FTA provides needed leverage to promote real and lasting changes to improve the deeply troubling situation in Colombia,” said Thea Lee, Policy Director, AFL-CIO. “We believe that the Obama Administration must insist on evidence of real and sustained improvements on all of these issues before moving the FTA forward.”

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Signed by the following organizations:

- The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)
- Amazon Watch
- Chicago Religious Leadership Network (CLRN)
- Institute of Policy Studies – Drug Policy Project
- Latin America Working Group (LAWG)
- Lutheran World Relief (LWR)
- Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
- Oxfam America
- TransAfrica Forum
- United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
- U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project (USLEAP)
- U.S Office on Colombia (USOC)
- Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)