

# U.S. Office on Colombia

Connecting civil society to policymakers



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## **Mistake to Move Forward on Colombia FTA without Addressing Root Causes of Violence**

*Coalition of Groups ask U.S. Congress to Oppose Colombia Free Trade Agreement*

Today, the U.S. Office on Colombia, along with more than 400 other organizations, academics, and individuals from the United States and Colombia, sent a letter to the U.S. Congress asking representatives to vote no on the pending U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement (FTA). The Labor Action Plan has not stopped new violence on trade unionists and labor activists from taking place, nor has it banned third party contracting that obstructs workers' ability to unionize. Colombia's internal armed conflict is generating violence and new displacements. Illegal armed groups exert influence over legal sectors of the economy including extractive industries, oil palm, mining, and development projects. Implementing the FTA solely based on the steps found in the Labor Action Plan, without addressing the deeper issues, will just lead to more violence and displacement.

The U.S. Office on Colombia is launching a series of videos today that provide testimony from Colombia on the impact of the FTA on small-scale farmers and workers, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities and overall human rights and security in Colombia.

While the U.S. Office on Colombia recognizes that the Obama Administration is trying to address labor concerns with the U.S.-Colombia Labor Action Plan, it joins over 400 US and Colombia civil society groups in calling attention to the fact that this Plan is insufficient. The Plan completely ignores the country's broader context and issues that generate violence against workers, human rights defenders, and activists. In 2011 alone, more than 20 human rights defenders have been killed and approximately 100 threatened.

"The groups that have been most affected by Colombia's ongoing armed conflict, such as Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, poor rural farmers and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are also the most likely to be negatively impacted by the FTA. But, the U.S. and Colombian governments have failed to implement policies to mitigate these potentially devastating impacts," Kelly Nicholls, Executive Director of the U.S. Office on Colombia, said.

Colombian small-scale farmers would be devastated by the implementation of the FTA. The FTA would force Colombian agricultural products to compete without any protection against U.S. subsidized commodities. A rigorous investigation by Colombian economists Luis Jorge Garay and Fernando Barberi showed that as a result of the implementation of the FTA, Colombia's 1.8 million small farmers would see their net agricultural income fall by over 16 percent on average. And nearly 400,000 small

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farmers – who on average have less than five years of formal education and already live below the poverty line – would lose between 48 and 70 percent of their income.

“The FTA would have a devastating impact on small-scale farmers’ livelihoods and would thus likely push them to cultivate coca or join the ranks of the illegally armed groups. This would undermine U.S. counter-narcotics and alternative development efforts in the country,” Kelly Nicholls said.

With over 5.2 million persons internally displaced (IDPs), Colombia competes only with the Sudan for the country with the largest total IDP population in the world. Threats, attacks, murders, and new displacements of human rights defenders, Afro-Colombian, and indigenous leaders continue to be a serious problem. Armed combat continues, successor paramilitary groups have presence in 23 of the 32 Colombian departments and continue to commit widespread and systematic grave human rights abuses, and justice for human rights cases remains elusive. Last week, Afro-Colombia IDP activist, Ana Fabricia Cordoba, was murdered in Medellin despite having repeatedly denounced threats and even publicly calling for protection from officials.

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