

8 August 2022

Mr

Gustavo Francisco Petro Urrego
President of the Republic of Colombia

Mrs

Francia Elena Márquez
Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia

Dear President Petro and Vice-President Márquez:

The undersigned national and international organisations congratulate you on beginning your roles as President and Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia. Your presidency offers a new, hard-won opportunity to address the numerous attacks faced by human rights defenders and social leaders in the country. It also offers us the chance to transform this reality, to apply differentiated approaches and to ensure a violence-free environment in which defenders can fulfil their essential role in ensuring accountability, justice and rights for all.

For many years, being a human rights defender in Colombia has meant living a life of aggression, harassment, surveillance, stigmatisation and threats. These crimes have remained largely unpunished. These violations have affected families and communities. In addition, the country has been deprived of vital critical voices and talent essential to creating a more inclusive society that contributes to a global conversation in which human rights are promoted and protected.

Tackling the root causes of threats and attacks against defenders will not be easy, it will involve challenging the powers that seek to silence them and reshaping the structures and systems that encourage attacks and perpetuate impunity. We trust that you will get to work in curbing this persistent violence, and so we would like to share with you three recommendations that we consider essential so that, in your first 100 days in office, you can move forward and demonstrate that you are serious about promoting the right to defend the rights and the protection of defenders:

1/ Re-establish all spaces for dialogue with civil society related to the situation of human rights defenders. By way of example, we ask you to reactivate the National Process of Guarantees (headed by the Minister of the Interior) and its 20 territorial processes; we ask you to promote the proper functioning and fulfilment of the mandate of the National Commission of Security Guarantees; we ask you to reactivate the Sub-Commission on Guarantees and Human Rights of the Single National Roundtable (article 9 of D.870 of 2014) with the Agrarian, Peasant, Ethnic and Popular Summit; and give a decisive boost to the Intersectoral Commission of Guarantees for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders -CIG- for the implementation of the Comprehensive Programme of Guarantees for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders.

2/ Implement the provisions of the Peace Agreement that relate specifically to the right to defend human rights: these include the elaboration of a policy for the dismantling of illegal armed groups by the National Commission for Security Guarantees, the emphasis on the work of dismantling the structures of these groups at the hands of the Special Investigation Unit of the Prosecutor's Office, the implementation of the Comprehensive Security and Protection Programme for communities and organisations in the territories, and in particular aspects related to the collective protection of organisations and communities and those with an ethnic focus; the convening of the High Instance of the Comprehensive Security System for the Exercise of Politics (SISEP). We suggest that the National Peace Council resume its work and that a plan be designed for the effective implementation of the recommendations on human rights defenders formulated by the Truth Commission of Colombia.

3/ Building upon existing national and international guidance and commitments in this area: there are now a number of resolutions and recommendations from national organisations and international bodies that provide a roadmap for ensuring a safe and enabling environment for defenders. These include the recent reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and The Protocol of Hope - a civil society initiative - designed to minimise and address threats against defenders.

All of these should be the starting point for the construction of a policy; there is no need to reinvent them when it comes to promoting and protecting the right to defend rights in the country. It is first necessary to review what exists, try to apply it, and organise and evaluate the current institutional offer, so as not to create new structures that repeat the existing ones.

We also remind you that there is currently a court decision in effect from 11 May 2020, in which the High Court of Bogotá protected the right to defend human rights. Its enforcement is currently being delayed due to a pronouncement needed by the Constitutional Court, in the framework of its review.

We hope that you will find these suggestions useful. We would very much welcome the opportunity to develop some of the elements raised here in a meeting with you, at a time and date convenient to you.

Finally, Mr. President, we would like to express our willingness to continue urging the international community to accompany the activities of implementation, monitoring and verification of the commitments for the protection of human rights defenders.

Respectfully,

Organisations

GemPaz

Women and Development Forum - FOKUS

The Lutheran World Federation / Colombia-Venezuela Programme

Alliance for solidarity

Fundación Mundubat Asociación paz con Dignidad Movimiento por la Paz - MPDL - (Peace with Dignity Association)

CooperAcció

kolko - Human Rights for Colombia e. V. (Germany)

Geneva for Human Rights - Global Training & Policy Studies

International Service for Human Rights- ISHR

Swiss Colombia Working Group (ask!)

Colombian Commission of Jurists

ABColombia

Gempaz, Ecumenical Group of Women Peacebuilders

Peace Cooperation Assembly

Space for Cooperation for Peace

Law Society of England and Wales

Alliance of Social and Allied Organisations

Protection International

Peace Brigades International

Centre for Justice and International Law (CEJIL)

Oxfam Colombia

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

ForumCiv

Sumapaz Foundation

Persons

Marta Cecilia Londoño

Laura Juliana Bonilla Pinilla

Marc Montany Daufí

Jessica Ramirez

The Lutheran World Federation

María Cristina Umbarila Chacón

Blanca Lucía Valencia

Juana Corral

Ana Milena Gonzalez

Ana María Rodríguez

Jael Moya Ramírez

Gloria Laverde Mendoza

César Nicolas Mendoza gonzalez

Matthias Schreiber

Adrien-Claude Zoller

Norma Inés Bernal Vélez

Louise Winstanley

Maria Cristina Umbarila Chacon

Tania Jácome

Maria Catalina Robayo

Hilda Josefa Coronado C.

Eleanor Openshaw

Javier Garate

Natalia Jiménez Molano

Carlos Mejia

Javier Arcediano Rey

Aída Pesquera

Marina Brilman

Stephan Suhner