



Justice for Colombia and Progress Event:
Never ending violence? How can Colombia Achieve peace and respect for Human Rights
House of Commons, Wednesday 17 June 2009

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Ambassador of Colombia

Distinguished Chair; Minister; Members of Parliament; Ladies and Gentlemen – Good afternoon and thank you.

First, I want to thank the UK Government, NGOs and civil society organizations, both in and outside of Colombia, for their work in promoting and defending human rights in my country.

Colombia is one of the oldest and most stable democracies of Latin America. Over the past 200 years, there have been only 2 during which Colombia was not in a democratic political framework. Nonetheless, we have also been afflicted by severe violence for 52 years.

We, the people of Colombia want the violence to end. We have struggled for several generations, and we have learned that Colombia's violent situation is broad and complex. The main actors are terrorist organizations, as recognized by the UN, the EU and the US. Over-simplifying the conflict hinders and delays the process by which we can achieve sustained peace.

You may remember that in 2001, the EU described Colombia as an almost failed state. In 2002, President Uribe's government began with 400 Mayors unable to work in their own municipalities, as a result of the constant threats they and their families received from guerrilla and paramilitary groups alike.

A page of our history will tell of the weakness of the State and its inability to protect its people; the horror of the illegal armed groups and the unprecedented levels of power and violence they achieved with funds from illicit drug trafficking; and the failings of all to combat and defeat these evils and provide justice, truth and reparation for the victims and punish the criminals.

I. SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

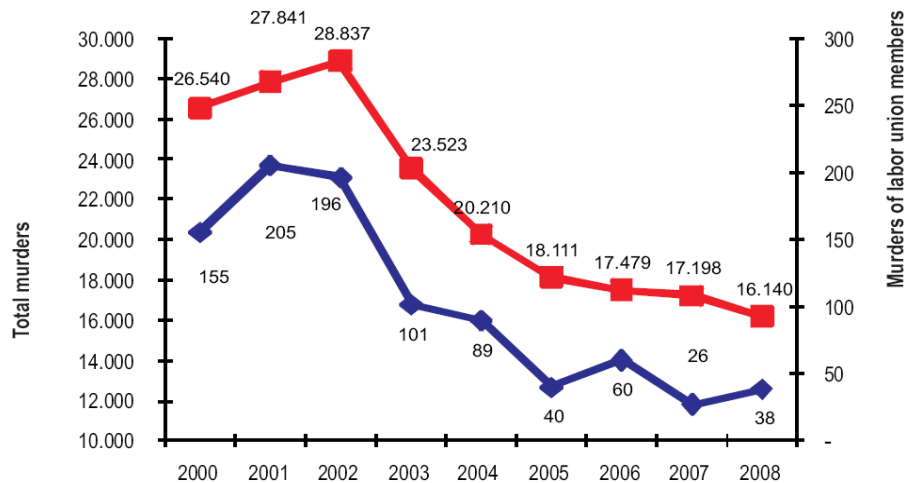
The Government of Colombia is fully committed to the defence and protection of the life, liberty, security and human rights of everyone, without exception. Between 2002 and 2008, we reduced:

- i. The number of homicides by 44%
- ii. The number of victims of massacres by 75%
- iii. The number of extortive kidnappings by 88.5%.



- iv. The number of homicides of indigenous people by 66%
- v. That of journalists by 100%
- vi. And that of union members by 80%

Total Murders per year vs. Murders of Union Members per year



Of course, we cannot diminish the importance of life to simple statistics and we will not rest until these numbers are reduced to zero.

We have implemented a surveillance and protection programme, directed by a Committee of state officials and representatives from Trade Union Confederations, amongst others, to safeguard those who are under any threat or at direct risk due to their humanitarian, social, public or political activities in denouncing and preventing the abuse of human rights.

The protection of the life and rights of trade union members and human rights defenders is one of the highest priorities of the Colombian Government.

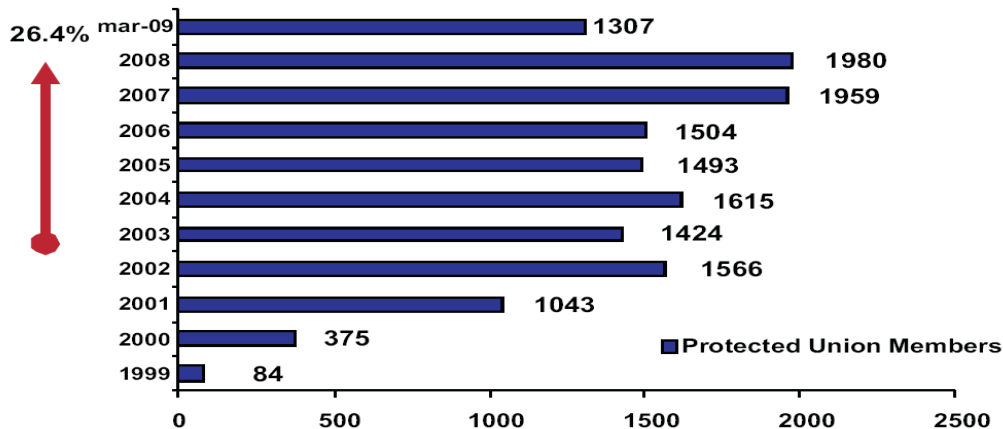
To date, the programme covers 7,772 municipal councillors, union and NGO members, journalists and mayors. In 2008, 1,980 members of trade unions were included in this Programme; and, between January and March this year, the Programme has benefitted another 1,307 trade union members. None of those under the protection programme have lost their life.

DIRECT BENEFICIARIES OF PROTECTION 1999 – MARCH 2009

TARGET GROUP	Persons										
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Mar 09
Municipal councillors	0	0	0	404	1,120	832	1,195	1,198	2,150	2,462	1,920
Union members	84	375	1,043	1,566	1,424	1,615	1,493	1,504	1,959	1,980	1,307
NGOs	50	224	537	1,007	1,215	733	554	683	613	1,003	491
Mayors	0	0	0	212	344	214	87	76	390	295	191
Journalists	0	14	69	168	71	125	46	64	128	154	124

Source: Ministry of Interior and Justice - March 09

PROTECTION



Source: Ministry of Interior and Justice

On 30 April 2009, a government and civil society taskforce was established to design and implement strategies, with the participation of the UN and the international community, to promote and protect the work of NGOs and community leaders in Colombia.

It is worth noting that no such programs existed prior to President Uribe's government.

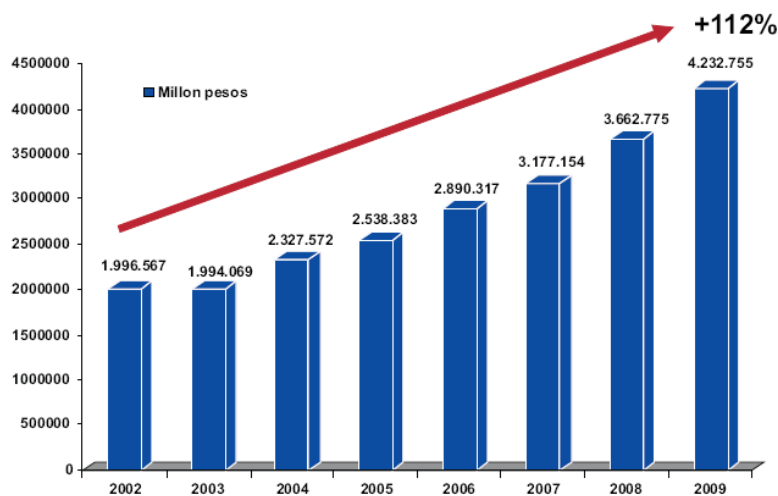
II. THE STRENGTHENING OF JUSTICE

The best way to fight the terrorists who attack the people is through justice and the rule of law. As well as working to change the social conscience so as to prevent future human rights violations, one of our priorities has been to strengthen our judicial system to make it more effective, responsive and accessible for every citizen and thus aid our fight against impunity.



The budget for the judiciary, which is fully independent of the executive, has been increased by 112% since 2002. In the Fiscalía, a special human rights unit was established with 2,166 new jobs created including special groups of prosecutors and judges solely dedicated to the investigation of the murder of trade union members. As a result, we have gone from 12 indictments for criminal actions against trade union members in 2002, to 190 to date. 281 people have been convicted and 175 are currently in prison.

JUSTICE BUDGET



Source: Direction National Budget

Despite our enormous efforts to prevent them, we recently had to recognise and confront crimes committed by a few members of our armed forces acting outside the law, against the policies of institutions to protect and promote human rights. The Government of Colombia is pained by any instances of human rights abuses and, even more so, if these are committed by a renegade state agent.

The Government has shown no tolerance for these so called false-positives as evidenced by the extraordinary measures we have taken thus far:

- The unprecedented dismissal of 27 members of the armed forces in October of 2008, including 3 generals and 11 colonels.
- A sentence from the Supreme Court reassigning all alleged cases of false positives from military courts to ordinary penal courts of justice.
- The implementation of obligatory Human Rights training and certificate programme for all members of the armed forces, and



- The ongoing investigation of 1,056 cases of alleged homicides that have resulted to date in 83 convictions.

III. SOCIAL COHESION

The poor and vulnerable are most affected by violence, terrorism and the illegal drugs trade. Thus, the Government has simultaneously implemented various social programmes which are essential to providing greater social and economic opportunities for all.

Since 2002, we have:

- i. Reduced the rate of poverty from 56% to 45%
- ii. That of extreme poverty from 21% to 12%.
- iii. Decreased the rate of unemployment from 14% to 10%
- iv. Increased the number of children and senior citizens benefitting from subsidies from 357 thousand to 1.9 million
- v. Provided 90% of the population with a fully comprehensive health-care system
- vi. Raised the coverage of the educational system from 81% in 2002 to 94% in 2008, and
- vii. Enlarged the vocational training programme (SENA) by 4.8 million people to including a total of 6 million.

The quality of life and security of all citizens in Colombia has improved in both rural and urban areas as a result of the Democratic Security and Defence Policy of President Alvaro Uribe. This has been a policy of systematically protecting and upholding human rights, reducing poverty and building a fair and more equal society through the implementation of three main pillars:

1. The restoration of security, with democratic values, for all;
2. The growth of socially responsible investment; and
3. Increased social cohesion.

Prior to 2002, Colombia had many problems which in many cases seemed invisible. Through the strengthening of the state and the judiciary, the invisible has become visible, such as in the case of paramilitarism.

Colombia is today a healthy democracy where leaders of all parties can engage freely in debate, as enshrined in the constitution. For the first time in Colombia's political history, several members of the opposition parties have been elected to high-level positions – 41% of congressmen; and 36% of departmental governors and mayors of major cities, including the Mayor of Bogota.

In addition, and with the support of the government, trade unions in Colombia have just obtained two very important achievements:



- i. Congress approved Law 1210, which transfers to the judiciary, the authority of qualifying strikes
- ii. The Constitutional Court declared the autonomy of workers to create unions – in fact, the latter has been criticized for resulting in an atomization of currently established trade unions.

Today, almost all of Colombia lives in peace. However, scattered terrorists cells with no limits in the abuse of human rights and financed through the illegal drug trade still operate. These terrorists still rely on international lobbies which, often in good faith but in some occasions out of complicity, seek to present them as contemporary Robin Hoods.

As a result of the appalling terrorist violence and the weakness of the state, more than 2.5 million have been internally displaced. In this respect, we have to painfully recognize that human rights abuses still remain, despite the great progress achieved by the state, the government and the civil society.

Also, Colombia is now facing new necessities from the post-conflict situation in many areas formerly overlooked by the state. More than 30 thousand men and women have voluntarily abandoned the guerrilla and paramilitary groups and now require educational and welfare support from the government and civil society to successfully return to civilian life.

All these factors combine to add to the complexity of the situation and result in some instances of continued human rights abuses.

With or without the cooperation of the international community, and with or without its comprehension, Colombia has the unwavering commitment to prevent the violation of human rights through education, the strengthening of our justice system and the fight against impunity. The government of Colombia, and civil society, are committed to achieving this objective.

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