



HUMAN RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA

HE Mr Mauricio Rodriguez Munera
Ambassador of Colombia

Wednesday 28 October, 17:30 – 18:45
Committee Room 6, House of Commons

Distinguished Chair, Rt Hon Ann Clwyd MP; Members of Parliament; Mr. John Rankin, Director of the Americas at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Sophie Haspeslagh, Programme and Advocacy Manager, ABColombia; Louise Winstanley, Peace Brigades International; Eduardo Carreño, of the Collective José Alvear Restrepo; Ladies and Gentlemen. Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to participate in this event.

I would like to take the opportunity 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.

As the recently appointed Ambassador of Colombia to the United Kingdom, allow me to start by stating that we all share a common objective; that is, zero human rights violations in Colombia and the rest of the world. In fact, all Governments have a moral and legal mandate to safeguard the human rights of everyone in their country. As such, we are all human rights defenders.

We are very pleased with Minister Chris Bryant's recent visit to Colombia. Concluding this visit, Minister Bryant and the Government of Colombia emphasised through a joint statement "the great standing of the relationship between both countries, characterized by a traditionally fruitful dialogue".

In the statement, President Uribe ratified the Government's commitment to human rights, asserting that "the defence of human rights is a necessary and legitimate act for democracy in a country like Colombia which is proud to be completely open to international scrutiny in this regard."

In accordance with this policy, Colombia voluntarily submitted itself to Universal Periodic Review by the UN Human Rights Council in December 2008. On that occasion, the Colombian Government accepted 64 recommendations from the Council and presented 69 voluntary commitments. Last June, the Government



presented a preliminary report on the progress made regarding these recommendations.

Colombia has maintained an open policy of dialogue, cooperation and international scrutiny, as evidenced by the 24 offices of the UN in Colombia as well as those of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

From the beginning of President Uribe's Government in 2002 to September 2009, we have received 15 UN Special Representatives on human rights by invitation of the Government. On 4 December 4 2009, the Special Rapporteur for Judicial Independence will be visiting Colombia.

As a complement to this important cooperation, civil society, the State and the Group of 24, accredited in Colombia, have established a dialogue and cooperation mechanism on Human Rights whose efficiency was showcased in the London and Cartagena summits and throughout other meetings in previous years.

As a result of the Government's commitment to the policy of international scrutiny, there has been major progress in the protection and enforcement of humans rights in Colombia.

The Government of Colombia is fully committed to the protection of human rights of everyone, without exception. Between 2002 and 2008, we reduced the number of homicides by 44%, the number of victims of massacres by 75% and the number of extortive kidnappings by 88.5%. During the same period, the number of homicides of indigenous people fell by 66%, that of journalists by 100% and union members by 80%. To date, 52,191 violent actors have demobilized from illegal armed groups. As you will agree such drastic reduction in violence and in the number of armed actors are in themselves a significant contribution to the protection of human rights in the country.

Let's not fool ourselves. The global drug problem is at the heart of the violence that still occurs. Throughout the late 80s and the 90s, drug trafficking fuelled unprecedented levels of violence as it became a major source of financing for all illegal armed groups in Colombia. Violent acts committed by these groups grew in number and severity as they began to compete amongst themselves for a higher share of this illegal trade.



The global drug problem has continued to change over the last decade and its damaging consequences for the nation's security and democracy remain. These security threats, bolstered by the millions of dollars which result from this illegal activity, undermine governability, economic and social development; weaken democratic institutions through corruption; increase violence and raise crime rates; generate human rights violations and destroy the environment. Greater commitment and cooperation between states on all fronts is therefore essential.

Consequently, it is appropriate that I take this opportunity to invite the international community to increase policies, efforts and actions geared towards combating the consumption and trafficking of illegal drugs, as well as all other crimes related to this international affliction.

Madam Chairman and dear participants:

All these achievements would not be sustainable without a strong judicial system. To further highlight the efforts undertaken by this administration on strengthening justice and the rule of law, the budget for the judiciary has been increased by 112% since 2002. In addition, a special human rights unit was established in the Fiscalía and 2,166 new jobs were created including special groups of prosecutors and judges solely dedicated to the investigation of trade union member homicides. In years prior to this administration, victims of abuse and their relatives were afraid to alert the authorities of any crimes committed against them. As a result of the Democratic Security Policy, which has offered the appropriate safeguards and guarantees for participating in trials, we have gone from 12 indictments for criminal actions against union members in 2002, to 207 to date. 305 people have been convicted and 185 are currently in prison.

This unit has also been rigorously investigating the cases of alleged crimes committed by members of the armed forces acting outside the law and against the Governments' human rights policies.

On 26 June, a firm step was taken when the National Congress passed and President Uribe sanctioned Law 1309/09, which strengthens protection for trade unionists and human rights defenders and increases sentences for crimes committed against them. According to the new law, the sentence for the murder of any trade union member has been increased from 20 to 30 years, in line with the crimes of genocide, forced disappearance, torture and forced displacement.



In this context, allow me to comment on a research paper released in October 2009, based on an independent and statistically rigorous investigation by Dr Daniel Mejia, a Professor at the School of Economics of the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota. The investigation concludes that there is “no statistical evidence supporting the claim that a greater intensity of union activity leads to more violence against union members” in Colombia. The results of this study were presented in Canning House on 12 October 2009, at an open event to which many of you were invited. Copies of this research paper can be obtained directly through the Universidad de los Andes or on the Embassy of Colombia’s website. I invite all human rights defenders and academics to participate in the debate which results from this analysis.

Ratifying this, consider what 14 Colombian Trade Union Presidents wrote to the European Commission: “It is simply not true that the terrible human rights situation which characterised the country in the last two decades of the last century has persisted and even further from the truth that it matches the catastrophic dimensions described, nor that the government and employers are to blame. The real perpetrators, the guerrillas and paramilitaries with the destructive finance of the drug trade, are under siege and are steadily being brought to book by a strong alliance of government, the armed forces and civil society.”

We have strengthened a surveillance and Protection Programme to safeguard the life, integrity, liberty and security of 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.

To date, everyone who has applied for protection has been granted it and the programme has grown to cover 10,716 union and NGO members, journalists and mayors and municipal counsellors, from 4,857 in 2002. Accordingly, resources allocated to the programme have also more than tripled to US\$41 million. All these efforts have greatly contributed to improving the security conditions of these social actors.

Regarding the Department of Administrative Security, the Government has decided to drastically change the institution and shift its responsibilities as follows: Interpol duties have now passed to the Colombian National Police and the institution will be relieved of its Protection and Judicial Police responsibilities.



Simultaneously, the commitment of the Colombian Government is to assist the relevant authorities get to the truth, through rigorous investigations against those who may have participated in any illegal use of surveillance equipment. In the spirit of maintaining an open dialogue with those members of civil society who may have been affected, the director of the DAS met with the UN's Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders, the International Humans Rights Federation and the UN's Human Rights High Commisioner based in Bogota. In addition, and for the first time in Colombia's history, Law 288/09 came into effect. This law provides a specific framework in which to guarantee the internal security of the State.

Some NGOs have been advocating for the deferral of any negotiation or ratification of free trade agreements. A suspension of the Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the European Union, as a result of a discussion on human rights in Colombia, would only further assist to exacerbate those conditions which until today have proven to be a main driver of human rights violations. These include the lack of market access for Colombian agricultural and manufactured products, and the subsequent lack of demand, which stimulate unemployment, poverty and the migration of jobs and resources to other economically viable sectors, including that of illegal activities.

We are very pleased with the latest results of the 2009 Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Program, in which Colombia increased five positions within the Human Development Index ranking from 2006 to 2007, second only to China.

We also welcome the US State Department's declaration of 11 September 2009 stating that "...the Colombian government has made significant efforts to increase the security of its people and to promote respect for human rights by its Armed Forces and has thereby met the certification criteria".

This recognition coincides with the comments made by UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, upon conclusion of her visit to Colombia, in which she expressed her gratitude to the Government for "its exemplary cooperation throughout the mission". Mrs Sekaggya also commended the Government for "the significant improvement in the overall security situation in the country since 2002" and noted that the "respect for the right to life and the exercise of fundamental freedoms for Colombian citizens have improved."



Furthermore, the UN's Special Rapporteur congratulated the Government "for designing policies and strategies for the protection of human rights defenders", welcomed "the significant increase of funds dedicated to the National Programme for the Protection for Human Rights Defenders (from \$13 million in 2002 to \$40 millions in 2009)" and "the adoption of the Law on Intelligence and Counterintelligence".

These recognitions, along with the 70% internal approval rating of the Government's performance, further stimulate the Colombian Government to maintain its efforts in strengthening all possible actions to defend and guarantee the respect of human rights in Colombia. The Colombian Government, via its Ambassador in London, remains open to proposals, suggestions and constructive criticism in order to find additional ways in which we can improve the wellbeing of all Colombians.

Thank you.