

via fax: 011 57 1 566 20 71 Señor Presidente Alvaro Uribe Velez Presidente de la Republica de Colombia	Via fax: 011-57 1 560-4630 Señor Sabas Pretel de la Vega Minister of the Interior and Justice, Colombia
via fax: 011 57 1 222 18 74 Doctor Jorge Alberto Uribe Ministro de la Defensa, Colombia	via fax: 011-571-640 04 91 Dr. Wolmar Pérez Ortiz Defensoría del Pueblo, Colombia

March 2, 2005

Dear Sirs:

We, members of the InterReligious task Force, are deeply distressed over reports of a **new massive displacement of the Afrodescendent communities of the Bojayá region in the Department of Chocó, Colombia**. According to the Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato (COCOMACIA, a rural people's association) and the Diocese of Quibdó, the increasing presence of armed groups could escalate into a massacre similar to the tragedy of May 2, 2002, when 119 people were killed in Bellavista, the municipal seat of Bojayá.

Since March 2004, the Afro-Colombian and indigenous inhabitants of Medio Atrato (Middle Atrato River Region in central Chocó Department) have been observing a massive advance guard of paramilitaries of the Bloque Elmer Cárdenas from the Opogadó and Napipi Rivers. This paramilitary advance, with the complicity of the military, has provoked mass displacement of five indigenous communities, which has been denounced by the People's Defense Office [Defensoria del Pueblo], the organizations COCMACIA and OREWA, and the Diocese of Quibdó. In the last two months, the paramilitaries have openly demonstrated their intention to take control of the Boyajá River watershed, currently controlled by the 57th Front of the FARC, who have also increased their presence.

In the face of these circumstances, on February 11 some 1,000 persons of at least seven Afro-Colombian communities began to flee towards Bellavista. The small town is overwhelmed, trying to give humanitarian aid to a population larger than the town itself.

As a result of these reports and our grave concerns, **we strongly urge you and your government to:**

- Ensure that the military avoid direct confrontations in areas where there is civilian population; that they permit free movement of civilians and humanitarian aid groups; that they not restrict the passage of food, medicine, fuel and other basic items; and that they sign the proposed Humanitarian Agreement developed by the organizations of the Chocó Interethnic Solidarity Forum.
- Fulfill your constitutional obligations towards the displaced populations, the towns that receive the displaced persons, and the people that remain on their lands.
- Search out, through all possible means, a negotiated solution to the conflict.

In December 2004, 48 Members of the U.S. Congress, including four from our local region, wrote to President Uribe, urging protection for Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó who are caught in the crossfire of the armed conflict. We urge you to take all necessary measures to protect civilian populations while avoiding armed conflict in populated regions.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai, Coordinator

Copies: Luis Alberto Moreno, Colombian Ambassador to the US ~ via fax: 1 202 232 8643
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 Senator George Voinovich, US Senate ~ via email: Daniel_knezevic@voinovich.senate.gov
 Senator Mike Dewine, US Senate ~ via fax: 216.522.2239
 U.S. Representatives Brown, Kaptur, Kucinich, LaTourette, Ryan, Tubbs Jones ~ via email and fax

The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: