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Fax: 011 57 1 266 0414 <b>JUAN MANUEL SANTOS</b> Minister of Defense of Colombia	Fax: 011 57 1 222 1874 <b>CARLOS HOLGUIN SARDI</b> Minister of the Interior and Justice

October 23, 2008

Dear Sirs:

We, members of the InterReligious Taskforce on Central America, are extremely concerned for the safety of more than **10,000 workers in the sugar industry in the Departments of Valle del Cauca and Cauca** who went on strike in September 15 because of the refusal by the Sugar Cane Growers' Association, Asocaña, to negotiate on basic demands the workers presented in July for better pay, (they now make about \$200 per month), shorter hours, (they now frequently work 14 or more hours per day), a healthier work environment, better housing and educational facilities, and a formal work contract.

More than 100 workers were injured on September 15 when the President ordered the military into the mills to remove striking workers. The mill owners have called upon the national police and private security to stop and inspect mill workers; paramilitary groups have threatened several workers. The Ministry of Social Protection has stated that there is no "labor problem" but just a problem of "social order." The Minister has also implied that workers are taking action on behalf of illegal armed groups. These are code words that, in Colombia, often lead to repression and even death sentences.

We therefore **strongly urge you to:**

- immediately instruct state forces to halt their aggression against the legitimate protests of the cane cutters;
- begin immediate investigations of those responsible for physical attacks against the workers, make the results public and bring those responsible to justice;
- provide the sugar industry workers with work contracts and labor guarantees that include social security benefits, rights to free association and unionization;
- eliminate the system of association and co-operative contracts which are subjecting the workers to dangerous and unfair working conditions, violating labor rights contained in both domestic law and international agreements signed and ratified by the Colombian state and with the International Labor Organization.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai, Coordinator

cc: Dr. Mario Iguaran, Attorney General of Colombia ~ via fax: 011 57 1 570 2000  
Dr. Wolmar Antonio Pérez Ortiz, National Human Rights Ombudsman ~ via fax: 011 57 1 640 0491/691 5500  
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Carolina Barco Isakson, Colombian Ambassador to the US ~ via fax: 202.232.8643  
William Brownfield, US Ambassador to Colombia ~ via fax: 011.571.315.2197  
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Javier Hernández Valencia, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Colombia office ~ via fax: 011-571. 658-3300  
Paolo Carozza, US member of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202.458.3992  
US Senators Brown & Voinovich and US Representatives Kaptur, Kucinich, LaTourette, Latta, Regula, Ryan, Sutton ~ via email

WFP/Colombia

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