

via fax: 011 57 1 596 0631  
**Excmo. Sr. Juan Manuel Santos**  
 President of the Republic of Colombia

via fax: 011 57 1 283 9876  
**Sr. Aurelio Iragorri Valencia**  
 Minister of Interior of Colombia

March 26, 2014

Dear President Santos and Minister Iragorri:

We are very concerned about the recent repeated death threats by text message to **Yomaira Mendoza**, a leader of the Afro-descendant community of the Humanitarian Zone Caño Manso in Carmen del Darién Municipality in the Curvaradó River Basin in Chocó Department. The threats began after January 14 when she made a statement to the Office of the Attorney General, which is advancing a criminal investigation into the misappropriation of land by powerful economic forces supported by paramilitary groups and related human rights violations, including the killing of Yomaira Mendoza's husband, José Eustoquio Cifuentes Rojas, in 2007.

Yomaira Mendoza has received up to five threats by text message on a single day. One of the recent messages read, "fighting for land, there will be more than enough on top of you." The police were requested to trace the reported threatening text messages, but they explained that they could not because of a new intelligence law. On March 5, Yomaira Mendoza was followed as she traveled from her region to Bogotá.

The Colombian Constitutional Court has given repeated orders to ensure the return of the collective lands to the Afro-descendant communities who were forcibly displaced in the late 1990s by paramilitaries and the security forces. The orders have not been implemented and the communities continue to face threats and intimidation. Paramilitaries have killed many of those who have returned to the Afro-descendant communities of Curvaradó in the past few years and have complained about the continued occupation of their lands by palm plantation growers and other economic interests.

Members of the XII Brigade of the Colombian Army, who had been providing security around the perimeter of the collective lands of Caño Manso, informed the government and the human rights NGO Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission that they had left the area because of forthcoming national elections. The National Protection Unit has not met with Yomaira Mendoza in the Caño Manso area, explaining that it was too dangerous for them to meet her there.

A report by the Colombian Institute for Rural Development (INCODER), published in December 2012, identified businesspersons who were illegally exploiting the land that is part of the collective territory of the Afro-descendant communities. In a judicial ruling (Auto 299 of December 18 2012), the Constitutional Court established a timeframe and criteria that the government must follow to ensure the return of lands to the Afro-descendant communities. Attempts by state authorities to implement court orders have been met with death threats and serious human rights violations.

Therefore we **strongly urge** that you

- provide effective protection for Yomaira Mendoza and residents of the Caño Manso community, in accordance with their wishes;
- order a full and impartial investigation into paramilitary threats against members of the communities of Curvaradó, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups and break their links with the security forces, in line with repeated UN recommendations.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
 Co-Coordinator

copies: Comisión Interreligiosa Justicia y Paz ~ via fax  
 Luis Carlos Villegas, Ambassador of Colombia to the US ~ via fax: 202.232.8643  
 Andrew Bowen, Interim Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy to Colombia ~ via fax: 011.571.275.4600  
 Olivia Franken, Desk Officer for Colombia, US State Department ~ via fax: 202.647.2628  
 José de Jesus Orozco Hernández, Rapporteur for Colombia, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202.458.3992  
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via fax

UA 50/14\_Colombia

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