

via fax: 011 571 596 0631  
**Excmo. Sr. Juan Manuel Santos**  
 President of the Republic of Colombia

via fax: 011 57 1 283 9876  
**Sr. Ministro Juan Fernando Cristo**  
 Minister of Interior of Colombia

May 26, 2016

Dear Sirs:

We are writing to protest the criminalization of community leaders in Bella Unión and El Guayabo, in the municipality of Puerto Wilches in Santander Department. Community leader **Alvaro García** was unjustly detained on April 24. Arrest warrants, which are based on false criminal charges, have been issued for three other leaders. We urge your government to see that the criminal charges against the four community leaders be dropped and that Alvaro García be released from detention.

Alvaro García is a campesino leader and leader of the Victim's Association of Magdalena Medio (ASORVIMM). He and other families have lived on and farmed land in Bella Unión and El Guayabo for the past 30 years. A dispute over ownership of the farms in El Guayabo began in 2009 when a man named Rodrigo López Henao arrived on the scene and claimed ownership. Since then he has made threats against the farming families and has used slander, accusing them of being associated with guerrilla organizations. There have also been violent clashes involving the police and men working for Rodrigo López Henao.

In October 2014 local authorities collaborated with Rodrigo López Henao to violently evict a family from their home in El Guayabo. Rodrigo López Henao began occupying the house of the evicted family until another violent clash in December 2014. Since then the local prosecutor's office has been building a legal case against the four campesino community leaders (including Alvaro García), which include criminal charges of conspiracy to commit a crime and weapons possession.

We believe that the criminal charges against the community leaders are in retaliation for their refusal to give up their land. **We therefore strongly urge that you**

- drop the criminal charges against all four community leaders
- release Alvaro García from detention
- respect the right of the farming families to reside on their land in Bella Unión and El Guayabo
- stop the collaboration of local authorities with Rodrigo López Henao in his attempts to evict the farming families

We sincerely hope that you will bring the full power of your office to bear on the crimes and injustices detailed above.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai            and            Christine Stonebraker-Martínez  
 Co-coordinators

copies: Christian Peacemaker Team-Colombia ~ via US mail  
 Juan Carlos Pinzón, Ambassador of Colombia to the US ~ via fax: 202.232.8643  
 Andy O'Neal, Human Rights Officer, US Embassy in Colombia ~ via email [onealRA@state.gov](mailto:onealRA@state.gov)  
 John Brandt, Desk Officer for Colombia, US State Department ~ via email  
 José de Jesús Orozco Hernández, Rapporteur for Colombia and for Human Rights Defenders, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202.458.3650  
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via email

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