

via email: contacto@presidencia.gov.co Excmo. Sr. Presidente Juan Manuel Santos President of the Republic of Colombia	via email: despacho.fiscal@fiscalia.gov.co Sr. Fiscal General Néstor Humberto Martínez Neira Attorney General of Colombia
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March 23, 2018

Dear President Santos and Attorney General Martínez Neira:

We are very disturbed by the assassination of community leader **Juan Mena Ortiz** in Quibdó, Chocó Department. He was a merchant and President of the Communal Action Board of the Alamos Neighborhood in the La Arrocería sector of the city. Armed men approached Juan Mena and shot him multiple times while he was walking in public at 3:00 in the afternoon on March 18.

Juan Mena had been receiving threats for some time. Armed criminal groups had been extorting him to pay a "vaccine (*vacuna*)," an illegal tax commonly charged by organized crime groups. Mena refused to pay. As a merchant and prominent community leader, his refusal to capitulate made a strong statement of resistance against cooperating with criminal groups trying to take control of the neighborhood.


He made the threats known to both civil and military authorities in Chocó, to the International Red Cross, and to the Organization of American States. A few weeks before his assassination, he left Quibdó because of the escalation of the threats. He traveled to Bogotá to discuss the threats with the National Protection Unit (UNP). He had just returned to his neighborhood a few days before he was killed. The Communal Action Board of the Alamos Neighborhood of Quibdó says that the homicide of Juan Mena brings the total to 15 people who have been murdered in their neighborhood shortly after receiving death threats.

The work of community leaders such as Juan Mena is particularly complex in this area. The lack of employment leaves the majority of the population living in poverty. Children, teens, and young adults are attracted to the drug trade. With the FARC demobilized, criminal gangs are vying for control of drug trafficking. The streets and schools are unsafe because of the violence between competing criminal groups. Although violations are reported, response on the part of public authorities is weak.

The Institute for Development and Peace (INDEPAZ) reports that at least 12 social leaders and human rights activists were murdered last year in Chocó. This trend needs to end. Therefore, **we strongly urge you to**

- conduct an immediate and thorough investigation into the murder of Juan Mena Ortiz, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- enact public policies that will address the increasing problem of criminal organizations and drug trafficking in Quibdó, in consultation with community leaders.

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinators



Christine Stonebraker-Martínez

copies: Camilo Reyes, Ambassador of Colombia to the US ~ via fax: 202.232.8643 and email
Rebecca Daley, Human Rights Officer, US Embassy in Colombia ~ via email
Ryan Reid and Christine Russell, Desk Officers for Colombia, US State Dept ~ via email
Francisco José Eguiguren Praeli, Rapporteur for Colombia, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email
US Senators Brown & Portman
US Representatives Beatty, 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: