

President Juan Manuel Santos
Casa Nariño
Carrera 8 No.6-26;
Edificio Administrativo: Calle 7 No.6-54
Bogota, Colombia

August 7, 2010

Dear President Santos,

We, the undersigned, wish to express our strong support for progress in the establishment of a constructive regional dialogue around the internal conflict in Colombia and its impact on neighboring countries. We consider this dialogue - based on mutual trust and respect - to be essential to the construction of a lasting peace in Colombia and to regional stability.

Civil society organizations in the United States and in Latin America, as well as regional bodies including the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), have worked tirelessly to open doors for dialogue and seek a more comprehensive approach to Colombia's bloody 60 year old civil war. Unfortunately, Colombia, under the Uribe government, focused instead on a policy of increased militarization that has claimed an enormous human and material toll, especially for Colombia's Afro descendant and indigenous communities. We urge you, as president, to open a new chapter in Colombian history, its relationship with its citizens, and with its neighbors.

The Uribe administration left behind it a dismal human rights record that is the direct product of the so-called democratic security policy first implemented in 2003. Along with over 20,000 deaths of combatants, thousands of civilian non-combatants have been killed according to human rights groups. Over 2,000 extrajudicial killings allegedly perpetrated by Colombia's armed forces are currently under investigation by the country's Prosecutor-General. Meanwhile, the number of internally displaced in Colombia has reached the millions and hundreds of thousands of Colombians have sought exile in neighboring countries.

Former President Uribe also has left a sad record in the foreign policy realm given the troubling actions his government has taken in the regional arena and his refusal to consult affected countries before taking these actions. His government's decision in 2008 to invade and bomb Ecuadoran territory without any regard for that country's sovereignty led to a regional crisis that continues to have repercussions to this day. His decision in 2009 to sign an agreement with the United States that greatly enhances the US military presence in Colombia, has led to further tensions with countries throughout South America that are historically wary of any form of US military buildup in the region.

In the final days of his government, President Uribe once again chose to provoke a neighbor - in this case Venezuela - rather than engage in much needed dialogue. With his government's decision to make unsubstantiated accusations before the OAS against the Chavez government at a crucial moment of transition that should offer a unique opportunity for putting relations with Venezuela on a new path, Uribe once again demonstrated his preference for conflict over dialogue.

Yet we wish nonetheless to express our hope that Colombia's internal situation and external relations can and will improve. President Santos, you undoubtedly bear a share of the responsibility for the security policies implemented by Uribe, given that you were Colombia's defense minister from 2006 to 2009. However, your pre-inaugural statements suggest that you may be willing to turn a new page, to begin writing a new chapter. It is our hope, both for Colombia and for the future stability of the region, that now that you are in office you will seek to significantly revise the harmful security policies put in place by former President Uribe and to work in earnest to rebuild relations with the rest of the region.

Hope for real change in Colombia lies on the horizon. We strongly urge the new Colombian administration to foster improved dialogue, and a negotiated peace, within Colombia as well as with neighboring countries as Colombians move forward in constructing a more peaceful and democratic nation. Nothing less is owed to the thousands of Colombians who have been victims of this bloody conflict or who have been displaced or exiled in foreign lands for more than half a century.

Sincerely,

Fr. Roy Bourgeois, Founder, SOA Watch

Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor emeritus, MIT

Cornel West, Princeton University

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* For identification only

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OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza
Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez,