

Honorable Charles Rangel  
2354 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515  
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January 17, 2006

Dear Congressman Rangel,

On behalf of the members of the Colombia Human Rights Committee, Fellowship of Reconciliation, U.S. Office on Colombia, the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, and Witness for Peace, we wish to congratulate you on your ascension to Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.

We are writing to you to express concern about the free trade agreement (FTA) the Bush administration recently signed with Colombia.

As you may know, our organizations aim to encourage respect for human rights and a negotiated settlement of the armed conflict in Colombia. We have closely monitored the impacts of Plan Colombia and the U.S. war on drugs in the region.

It is because of our continued concerns for human rights and peace in Colombia that we write to you now about the U.S.-Colombia FTA.

We are particularly worried about the potential for the agriculture provisions in the agreement to worsen the conflict, and concomitant human rights abuses, in rural areas of the country. Under the agreement as currently negotiated, Colombian farmers will lose crucial protections and be forced into direct competition with cheap exports by U.S. agribusiness interests. As a report by the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture clearly stated, the elimination of protections for peasant farmers would be highly detrimental to rural incomes and would force many peasants into “working in drug cultivation zones, or affiliating with illegal armed groups.”

The agriculture provisions will thus serve to undermine any potential progress towards truly tackling the issues of poverty and inequality that fuel the Colombian conflict. It has long been clear that only a political strategy that emphasizes equitable development in Colombia can hope to make a significant and lasting difference in our efforts to combat illegal drug production. The current strategy of seeking a military solution through Plan Colombia has not ended the growth of illegal drugs in Colombia, in fact according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Colombia saw a twenty six percent increase in the amount of land being used to grow coca from 2004 to 2005.

We are also deeply concerned about the signal that will be sent regarding our nation’s commitment to human rights if the Colombia FTA is ratified without any enforceable measures to protect human rights. Colombia is currently the most dangerous place in the world for trade unionists, with threats and assassinations on union leaders continuing. In addition, our Colombian partners have documented numerous cases of violations of the collective land rights of Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations: we fear that

without adequate provisions in place, this FTA could increase these violations in the future by opening these territories to development which will not benefit these ethnic minorities.

We thank you for your statements and your recent letter to the administration calling for a renegotiation of the Colombia FTA and would like to offer our support in helping to push for a renegotiation of the agreement so that it lifts up human rights in Colombia instead of undermining them.

Sincerely,

Cristina Espinel, Co-Chair  
Colombia Human Rights Committee

John Lindsay Poland and Susana Pimiento Chamorro, Co-Directors  
Fellowship of Reconciliation Task Force on Latin America and the Caribbean

Barbara Gerlach, Colombia Liaison  
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Heather Hanson, Executive Director  
U.S. Office on Colombia

Melinda St. Louis, Executive Director  
Witness for Peace

Cc: Ways and Means Committee