

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 17, 2012

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

As members of the Congressional Monitoring Group on Labor Rights in Colombia, we have been watching with deep concern and alarm the recent increase in death threats, assaults, and murders involving labor activists in Colombia. We draw your attention to just a few of the instances that have surfaced in the past month:

- On May 12, Jhon Jairo Castro Balanta received a message on his phone indicating that he would be “put to sleep” for his work as a leader of the Buenaventura port workers union. A similar threat was received by another Buenaventura port worker and union member who testified at a recent public hearing about labor exploitation at the ports. The Buenaventura port workers have been at the heart of recent efforts to crack down on hiring through illegal cooperatives, which are a focus the Labor Action Plan negotiated by your Administration and the Santos Administration.

Threats identical to the one sent by phone to Mr. Castro from the same phone number were received by leaders of the SINTRAINAGRO palm oil workers’ union and SINALCORTEROS sugarcane cutters’ union, and the President of the CUT-Santander union. Ports, palm oil, and sugarcane are all prioritized sectors under the Labor Action Plan.

- On April 27, Daniel Aguirre, a lead negotiator for sugarcane workers in an effort to shift workers from illegal cooperatives to permanent employment, was assassinated while he was out walking with his wife. Mr. Aguirre led a strike in 2008 and brought global attention to the plight of sugarcane cutters in Colombia.
- On April 21, leaders of SINTRAEMCALI, the Cali Municipal Corporation Workers Union, received death threats, which included an invitation to their own funeral (along with bullets and a prayer book). The materials make clear that the labor leaders have been under surveillance for some time by the “Black Eagles” (a paramilitary group), which issued the death threats. The SINTRAEMCALI union has been engaged in an emblematic labor rights case in Colombia, pushing for the reinstatement of 51 workers illegally fired for their union activities.

- On April 19, leaders of the SINTRAINAGRO union, which is working to address illegal hiring practices (including through illegal cooperatives) in the Puerto Wilches palm oil sector received written threats through a notice issued by the same paramilitary group, the “Black Eagles.” The Black Eagles identified these leaders as a “military objective” subject to “extermination.” According to on-the-ground reports, these threats targeting labor leaders, in combination with other threats and assaults aimed at palm oil plantation workers have resulted in some workers leaving the Puerto Wilches area and abandoning efforts to demand recognition of basic labor rights and better working conditions.

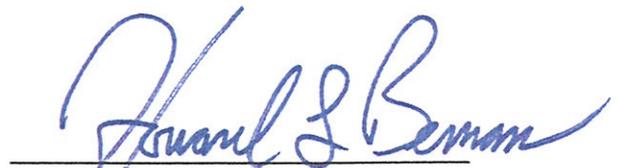
It is imperative that the Government of Colombia address this intensification of violence against labor activists, including by taking the necessary steps to identify and prosecute both the perpetrators of these acts as well as the intellectual authors. It is similarly critical that the Government of Colombia provide effective protection for those under threat.

We note that both the Labor Action Plan and the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) – which has gone into effect this week – include commitments directly on point. These not only include specific commitments to expand and strengthen the Government of Colombia’s protection program and to increase the government’s capacity and effectiveness in investigating and prosecuting crimes involving labor activists, but also the broad obligation to adopt and maintain in law and in practice fundamental internationally-recognized labor rights. Notably, the International Labor Organization’s Committee on Freedom of Association has long maintained that “a climate of violence . . . constitutes a serious obstacle to the exercise of trade union rights.”

While President Santos has stated his firm commitment to protecting labor rights, far more needs to be done. We ask your Administration to undertake maximum efforts to work with the Santos Administration to ensure that Colombia fully effectuate the commitments above and send the strongest possible message to those seeking to intimidate and undermine Colombian workers that their tactics will not succeed. We will be in touch and look forward to working with you and the Colombian authorities in this regard.

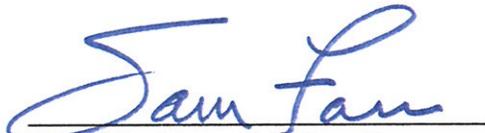
Sincerely,

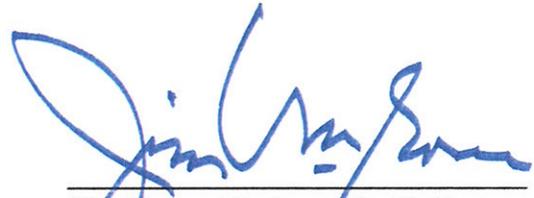

The Honorable George Miller


The Honorable Howard Berman


The Honorable Sander M. Levin


The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro


The Honorable Sam Farr


The Honorable James P. McGovern


The Honorable Michael H. Michaud


The Honorable Keith Ellison


The Honorable Henry C. Johnson, Jr.


The Honorable Joseph Crowley