

Bogotá, April 26, 2007

Mr. Kenneth Roth
Executive Director
Human Rights Watch

Dear Mr. Roth:

For the Colombian government, the work done by human rights organizations has great significance, and we appreciate and pay great attention to their observations. We agree with the United States Department of State on the application of guiding principles for non-governmental organizations. In the case of HRW we applaud its efforts to condemn all atrocities equally, its campaigns against anti-personnel mines, its concern for the rights of women, and its recognition of a state's right to the legitimate use of force when democracy is seriously threatened.

For those reasons and due to the importance of HRW's opinion for many actors in the international community, I find myself obliged to make some comments with respect to the testimony given by Mrs. Maria McFarland before the Sub Committee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the United States House of Representatives.

First of all, we agree on the HRW goals of strengthening Rule of Law, protecting the people, guaranteeing human rights and freedoms, and strengthening the Colombian democratic institutions that underpin her speech.

I must point out to you that the Colombian government has not hidden any of its problems and that is precisely why the work by all the institutions has been arduous and intense. But to present the situation in Colombia as one that is increasingly more serious does not fit with the reality.

In 1992 the country had homicide rates of 78 per every 100,000 inhabitants. I began my term in 2002 with a rate of 66 per 100,000. The good news that we Colombians are celebrating and that we would like you to recognize is that last year we managed to reduce that figure to 38 per 100,000. Our homicide rate is lower than that of South Africa, Venezuela, and El Salvador. That makes around 10,000 Colombians each year who are alive thanks to the Democratic Security Policy, which we have been implementing at an enormous sacrifice by the men and women in the Colombian Armed Forces and thanks to the decided bipartisan support given by the American Congress to Plan Colombia.

In 2001, 123 of our union workers were mercilessly assassinated. I am sad to say that we have only been able to lower that figure to 25 deaths last year, 100 less than a few years ago, because each one of those lives is important to us. But we

believe that enormous progress has been made that we would like to have recognized. And how my faith is bolstered to see that this year there has been only one death of a union worker so far in 2007. Perhaps the fact that we went from a national budget for the protection of vulnerable persons of around US \$2 million in 1999 to US \$30 million this year, or that we went from protecting 84 union workers to protecting 1,504, is what has managed to save these human lives.

We are aware of the human drama produced by the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and drug trafficking in the lives of our people, especially in terms of forced displacement. But we have made progress and we are convinced that we are on the right road. In the year 2006, the number of new displaced persons decreased by 48.1% with respect to those registered in the year 2002. The budget for programs for displaced persons tripled in the 2002-2006 period with respect to the 1995-2002 period, going from US \$270 million to US \$880 million. It is projected that US\$ 1.8 billion will be invested during this second term.

Eighty percent of all displaced households have received emergency humanitarian attention. During the 2002-2007 period, more than 65,000 urban and rural housing subsidies were given out. It is estimated that coverage for education and health for the displaced population was over 80% of the families registered. For displaced households with children younger than 18, more than 30% have been affiliated in the Families in Action program (120,000 families) since the year 2005. More than 2,188,000 peasants have been affiliated with food security programs as a mechanism for preventing displacement. And lastly, during the 2002-2006 period, the government has accompanied more than 32,000 families in their return to their place of origin. The High Commissioner of the UNHCR recognized during his most recent visit last month that Colombia's legislation is one of the most advanced and its attention system one of the most sophisticated in the world in the area of attention to displaced persons.

We do not have the slightest doubt about the importance for Colombia of knowing the truth about the paramilitary groups. As difficult as the revelations produced by the Justice and Peace process may be, relative to historical relationships between the paramilitary groups and different sectors of society, the national government considers it to be desirable, and gives its unlimited support to public knowledge of the whole truth.

The Law of Justice and Peace is allowing us to get to the bottom of ties that were hidden for many years between members of society and the now extinct self defense groups. Colombia is discovering the truth thanks to our peace process. In fact, the truth is a deliberate, desired, and necessary consequence of the government's peace process.

We also support the judicial branch with every economic, technical, and human resource necessary for investigations into the influence of the paramilitary groups on politics in order to bring about truth and justice. Starting with the year 2007, we have appropriated an additional \$2.6 billion for the Supreme Court of Justice for

investigations into the congressmen involved. The budget for the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions in 2007 has been increased by 8.9%, basically to attend to the new loads and expenses associated with Justice and Peace. For the National Development Plan we have requested special faculties to modify the personnel working for the Office of Public Prosecutions and the Office of the Procurator General, to meet the needs of the law of Justice and Peace.

Thanks to the peace process and the Law of Justice and Peace, today 31,671 Colombians who were members of the extinct paramilitary groups and close to 10,000 members of the guerrilla groups have laid down their weapons and are rejoining society. These new citizens who are living in legality, as well as the more than 10,000 guerrillas who demobilized voluntarily, who laid down their weapons but whom you discredit, have deep repercussions on Colombian society. They include 2,518 minors rescued from the war, 20,000 children who recovered their parents, and 40 thousand families who recovered their children, parents, or friends.

For these reasons, it surprises us that the HRW testimony sees concessions, failures to protect rights, faked demobilizations, and obstacles to investigations on every side. The process is difficult but it is being faced with transparency and with decisiveness, with respect for the independence of the democratic institutions.

In the opinion of the Colombian government, strengthening verification, reinforcing the capacity of the democratic institutions, and encouraging participation will make it possible for the process to be successful. The Colombian state has already invested US \$300 million in the development of social and economic opportunities for demobilized persons, and has programmed US \$386 million for the 2007-2010 period. Up to now the international community has invested only US \$11 million.

Mr. Roth, we do not want flattery, but rather objectivity. Similar to the recognition made last month by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Colombia last year: "The High Commissioner has observed greater commitment by the Colombian authorities to reaching the objectives of the recommendations made in our prior reports on the situation of human rights and international humanitarian law in Colombia, as well as a greater effort to value their concrete impact."

The Colombian government has led in the country's transformation process with the greatest of transparency, facing its citizens and the international community straight on. We therefore make an appeal for objectivity in this type of report in order to obtain constructive contributions to the strengthening of Colombian democracy, security, and the full guarantee of human rights.

Sincerely,

Alvaro Uribe Vélez