

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 6, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 “C” Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

As the coronavirus pandemic exposes and magnifies existing problems in each of the countries it ravages, we are particularly concerned that it is affecting the safety of Colombia’s brave human rights defenders and social leaders who are putting their lives on the line to build lasting peace.

We write to ask you to actively urge the Duque Administration to consider recommitting to implementing the historic 2016 peace accords and protecting Colombia’s endangered human rights defenders whose vulnerability has only increased during the COVID-19 quarantine.

Colombia is now the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders. Over 400 human rights defenders have been murdered since the signing of the peace accords – a loss of committed and valiant civic leaders that Colombia cannot afford. The Colombian government’s slowness in implementing the peace accords, its failure to bring the civilian state into the conflict zones, and its ongoing inability to prevent and prosecute attacks against defenders have allowed this tragedy to go unchecked. This appears to have intensified as illegal armed groups take advantage of the pandemic while the government fails to respond, further increasing the vulnerability of targeted rights defenders and local leaders.

For example, on March 19, three armed men entered a meeting where farmers were discussing voluntary coca eradication agreements and killed community leader Marco Rivadeneira. He promoted peace and coca substitution efforts in his community, represented his region in the guarantees working group to protect human rights defenders, and was a member of the national human rights network Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos. Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and poor farming communities like the San José de Apartadó peace community continue to suffer and are even more vulnerable from the unchecked presence of illegal armed actors in their territories.

Marco Rivadeneira was one of 23 social leaders killed between March 15 and April 24, during the first weeks of Colombia’s pandemic lockdown. According to the Colombian NGO, Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz – INDEPAZ, in the first six months of 2020, 153 social leaders and defenders were killed in Colombia.

To stop this tragedy, we ask you to firmly urge the Duque Administration to consider the following:

- Improve protection of human rights defenders and social leaders, starting with effective investigations of attacks and threats against them, identifying those who ordered these crimes and publicly presenting the outcomes of these investigation.
- Develop a road map for protection in consultation with defenders in the guarantees working group, including for pandemic-related challenges such as the need for personal protective equipment.
- Fund and implement collective protection measures with differentiated ethnic and gender approaches in consultation with communities through the National Protection Unit. Collective measures agreed to with Afro-descendant and indigenous communities' authorities must be guaranteed. The self-protection mechanisms of the San José de Apartadó peace community and similar humanitarian zones should be respected, including the support provided by international companions, even during the pandemic.
- Dismantle the paramilitary successor networks involved in drug trafficking, which fuel much of the violence against human rights defenders and social leaders. The government must honor its commitment to regularly convene the National Commission of Security Guarantees, which was established by the accords to develop and implement plans to dismantle illegal groups and protect communities, social leaders, and ex-combatants.
- Effectively investigate, prosecute, and present results about these paramilitary and criminal networks through the Attorney General's special investigative unit. We welcome the new agreement between the Colombian Attorney General's Office and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia to train prosecutors and investigators in aggressively addressing these human rights crimes. It is critical the State end impunity in the murders, disappearances, assaults and threats against human rights defenders, social leaders, land rights and environmental activists, journalists, trade unionists and other defenders.
- Swiftly hold accountable Colombian Army intelligence members, including at the highest ranks, who ordered and carried out mass surveillance on 130 journalists (including U.S. reporters), human rights defenders, political leaders, and military whistleblowers. The U.S. should also ensure that U.S. security and intelligence assistance does not assist, aid or abet such illegal surveillance, now or in the future.
- Vigorously implement the peace accords, including by adequately funding the transitional justice system, fully implementing the Ethnic Chapter, delivering on commitments for protection for ex-combatants and productive projects to reintegrate them into civilian life, and honoring commitments for truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition for victims of the conflict.

We urge you, Mr. Secretary, to ensure that all agencies of the United States speak with one clear voice to condemn these ever-escalating murders and to press the Duque Administration to take the necessary steps to identify and prosecute the intellectual authors of these crimes and dismantle the criminal structures that protect them.

Finally, we urge you to continue to provide valuable U.S. assistance to Colombia to implement the peace accords, provide humanitarian assistance for Venezuelan refugees and refugee receiving communities, and address the health and food security crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. should also take advantage of opportunities provided by the peace accords to carry out sustainable and lasting eradication of illegal crops by working with communities to replace coca with legal livelihoods and by dismantling trafficking networks.

Thank you for your attention to these important concerns in this difficult time.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

/s/

John Lewis
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Rosa L. DeLauro
Member of Congress

Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

John A. Yarmuth
Member of Congress

Robert C. “Bobby” Scott
Member of Congress

Frank Pallone, Jr.
Member of Congress

Maxine Waters
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Zoe Lofgren
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Betty McCollum
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Mark DeSaulnier
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Alcee L. Hastings
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Emanuel Cleaver, II
Member of Congress

André Carson
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
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Eleanor Holmes Norton
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Jackie Speier
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Bobby L. Rush
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Ayanna Pressley
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
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Stephen F. Lynch
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Ro Khanna
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Peter Welch
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Jared Huffman
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Donald S. Beyer, Jr.
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Ruben Gallego
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Marcy Kaptur
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Bonnie Watson Coleman
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Lucille Roybal-Allard
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Seth Moulton
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Ilhan Omar
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