

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 15, 2002

The Honorable Andrés Pastrana Arango
President of Colombia
Carrera 8 n. 7-26 Palacio de Narino
Santa Fe de Bogotá
Colombia

Via Facsimilie (571) 286-74-34

Dear President Pastrana,

We are very disturbed by the massacre that occurred on May 2, 2002 in Bellavista, Chocó, in which 119 people were killed, 95 wounded, and approximately 40 missing, nearly all of whom were of African descent. While we deplore the violent and unlawful actions of both the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Group (AUC) paramilitaries, this letter focuses on the regrettable inaction and reported actions of the Colombian Armed Forces (CAF). We are especially alarmed at the CAF's failure to act upon early warnings of imminent violence issued repeatedly, beginning in July, 2001, and up until one week in advance by the office of the Colombian Human Rights Ombudsman (la Defensoría del Pueblo), and also issued by the Colombian Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights.

On April 21, 2002, United Self-Defense Group (AUC) paramilitaries reportedly arrived in the urban areas of Bojayá and Vigia del Fuerte. We have been informed that three days later, the Defensoría del Pueblo warned the Colombian government of imminent violence due to AUC and FARC presence, and of possible massacres and massive displacements. Such early warnings serve little purpose if they are not followed by early action. Since no governmental action was reportedly taken until May 5th, it is not completely surprising that violence erupted in the form of the massacre at the church. So disturbing is this incident in light of the ignored warnings that an editorial in El Tiempo described the Bellavista massacre as "a genocide foretold."

We now have further disturbing reports that after CAF forces finally arrived in the zone, CAF aircraft have been indiscriminately bombing and machine-gunning the area. This has reportedly resulted in the death of a 21 year-old woman, the wounding of two others, and irreparable damage to these Afro-Colombian communities from which many of its residents have fled. Of course, an accurate victim toll is impossible under such circumstances. In addition, we have reports from the United Nations Human Rights office in Colombia and civil society groups that paramilitaries remain in the region and that no actions have been taken by the Colombian government to detain them. Given reported indiscriminate aerial attacks by the CAF and continuing paramilitary presence, civilians who remain in the village and those who fled or disappeared are at great risk. The massive displacement of the population from the region that is occurring is disturbing but familiar, as Afro-Colombians already make up a disproportionate number of the internally displaced persons in Colombia.

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Part of United States aid money Colombia has received was directed toward the implementation of an early warning system, with the goal of avoiding such atrocities. Therefore, we respectfully ask that your government explain the CAF's inaction despite having received early warnings, especially given that similar violence and insecurity are not new to the Pacific coast region. We also would appreciate receiving information regarding steps the Colombian government is taking to protect the civilian population in the Bojayá region and the Pacific Coast region in general. We are especially interested in actions that have been taken and procedures that have been instituted to respond rapidly to reports of paramilitary presence while the CAF is also present in the area.

It is our hope that the CAF can avoid deepening this humanitarian crisis by refraining from indiscriminate aerial attacks of the area. We urge you to avoid new military confrontations and to seek a temporary and multilateral cease-fire for all armed hostilities so that humanitarian assistance can reach the civilian population. We also urge you to investigate fully and prosecute vigorously any government officials responsible for collusion with the paramilitaries.

We thank you for your consideration of our concerns and look forward to hearing from you or Ambassador Moreno on these matters.

Sincerely,

Debra Myers
Diane E. Watson

Cyrene McKenney
Rosa L. Pen

Marcy Kaptur

Melanie Waters

Bonnie A. Thompson

Yanna W. Smith

Donald Wayne

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CC: Colin Powell, United States Secretary of State
Anne Patterson, Ambassador of the United States to Colombia
Luis Alberto Moreno, Ambassador of Colombia to the United States