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Statement for the Record from the Government of Colombia

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
United States Congress**

Hearing on “Creating Peace and Finding Justice in Colombia”

October 24, 2013

The Embassy of Colombia to the United States of America presents its compliments to Co-Chairmen James McGovern and Frank Wolf and members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. We thank you for inviting the government of the Republic of Colombia to provide this statement for the record on the hearing on “Creating Peace and Finding Justice in Colombia.” The Colombian government also acknowledges the important work the Commission carries out in the name of the late Congressman Tom Lantos to defend fundamental human rights around the world.

Advancing the protection of human rights and individual liberties of all Colombians is a continuous quest of the government of President Juan Manuel Santos.

Today Colombia is a country with a progressive agenda aimed at ending the deep inequalities and human rights violations that have occurred during past decades of conflict. Human rights and social inclusion are now at the core of the Colombian government’s policies, with particular emphasis in afro-Colombians, indigenous, and Roma population. The mission of each top public policy is to protect the population, repair the victims, and reduce inequality.

Institutions have been strengthened and there is a direct dialogue between the State and civil society. For this reason, President Juan Manuel Santos created the National System for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which coordinates all human right actions at the local and national level.

In addition, between 2010 and 2012, poverty was reduced by five percentage points. More than two million Colombians were lifted out of poverty and another one million out of extreme poverty.

The government is also providing free education through the public school systems for 8.6 million of our children. Colombia is no longer the most unequal country in Latin America;



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we have improved our GINI coefficient. Every year, nearly 7 million Colombians improve their vocational skills through our National Training Service –SENA.

Three public policies, in particular, are worth highlighting:

1. Advances in security

Over the past decade, the government of Colombia has focused on weakening and defeating illegal armed groups responsible for most of the violence in Colombia. Much has been accomplished to this date; since President Santos took office in August 2010, the FARC, ELN and the criminal gangs (BACRIM) have been significantly weakened, reducing not only their ability to cause harm but also their territorial presence and influence.

Between January and August 2013, there was not a single terrorist attack either by the FARC or ELN in 1,004 municipalities of Colombia – equivalent to 91 percent of all municipalities in the country. These criminal organizations are increasingly isolated and every day pose less of a threat to the well-being of Colombians. At the same time, the government's tough stance against BACRIMs has also reduced their territorial presence to only 14 percent of Colombian municipalities. These efforts have resulted in a significant reduction of homicides (45 percent) and kidnappings (95 percent) over the last decade.

For citizens who are at an extraordinary security risk because of their activities, the government, through the National Protection Unit (NPU), continues to implement special security measures. As of October 17, 2013, more than 8,000 persons had special security measures in place and the NPU continues to conduct security risk assessments in different parts of the country to ensure that anyone in need of special protection receives it.

2. Victims reparation and land restitution

President Santos' Administration understands that it is not enough to protect the population from threats to their security, it is also imperative to restore the lives of victims of the conflict. With that purpose, in June 2011, President Santos signed and implemented the Victims and Land Restitution Law adopted by Congress, a landmark piece of legislation that recognizes the suffering of victims of violence and provides reparations to facilitate reconciliation.

As of September 2013, the government had individually compensated more than 318,000 victims. As a result, victims are able to invest their compensation in technical and higher education, productive projects, improvement of their homes or acquisition of rural land.



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A rehabilitation program has been implemented in 23 cities, providing assistance to more than 19,000 individuals. Over 16,000 families received houses in rural and urban areas.

In addition, the government has launched 207 collective reparations processes to restore social, cultural and economic practices disrupted by the armed conflict. Thanks to this effort, victims of forced displacement have been able to return to their places of origin. For example, 18 families and 78 individuals from the Embera Katios indigenous community returned to their homes in Resguardo La Puria (Chocó); 70 indigenous families from the Wayúu community in Bahía Porte (Guajira) returned to their lands; and in December 2012, the government also supported the return of 532 indigenous people from Embera Chami community in Mistrató and Pueblo Rico (Risaralda).

As of September 17, 2013, 700 cases of land restitution have been resolved by restitution judges. Of those, 66 percent of restitution beneficiaries returned to live or work on their properties, 24 percent are waiting to go back while only 10 percent have not returned.

Two weeks ago, President Santos attended an event on reparation and land restitution in San Carlos (Antioquia). During his visit, a total 1,858 victims of displacement received compensation, 320 families returned to their lands and began a reparation process that includes psychosocial care, higher education, productive projects, and improvement of their homes or acquisition of rural land. San Carlos is a model of reparation and restitution for victims of the conflict and is just one example of what is occurring in many places throughout Colombia.

Clearly, enormous challenges remain in the implementation of law, now only in its second year, but our nation is on the right path.

3. Negotiations to end the conflict

Over the past year, the government of Colombia and representatives of the FARC guerrilla group have been conducting serious negotiations aimed at ending the conflict.

As President Santos said before the United Nations General Assembly this September: “My generation has not seen one single day of peace, and my dream is for my children and the children of all Colombians to have the chance to see it. We are tired of being afraid, we are tired of violence, we are tired of a conflict that confronts the children of a same nation and delays our development ... Our commitment goes beyond serving the victims of the past; our commitment is eliminating the possibility of having new victims as a result of this conflict.”



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Though a final agreement has not yet been reached, President Santos has said he will persevere in the negotiations as long there is a real opportunity for peace.

Conclusion

In sum, with these measures, Colombia is decisively moving forward on the path to lasting peace and prosperity, with a strong democracy, firmly supported by a commitment to human rights, social inclusion, justice and security for all.

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