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Ladies and Gentlemen

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The government of Canada is attempting to pass the FTA that it negotiated with Colombia. Various sectors of Canadian society have expressed their concern for human rights violations in Colombia: some recommended an independent human rights study, while others suggested that the Colombian government conduct its own evaluation or commit to periodically conducting human rights evaluations once the agreement is ratified.

On this subject we would like to remind you that detailed reports have been produced in recent months by a range of independent international organizations that clearly show the violations are not isolated events but rather follow a systematic pattern and have structural causes.

The army has killed thousands of young civilian men for the purpose of falsely inflating the body count of guerrillas killed in action. The government has defended the accused military personnel, provided them with legal and economic resources and carried out public relations on their behalf, while at the same time the victims have been persecuted and silenced. Also, most of those involved in these vile murders had to be set free when the Attorney General's office, which is subordinate to the government, allowed sentencing deadlines to pass.

For years DAS, the state security apparatus that is directly under the control of the Colombian president, monitored, threatened and intimidated hundreds of those who have politically opposed the Uribe government; it attacked the Supreme Court, which has valiantly undertaken investigations of parapolitical crimes and has convicted many parliamentarians close to the Uribe government; it created a sinister conspiracy that included everything from spying activities to death threats and planting false evidence to justify raids on Human Rights NGOs. The situation is so bad that even the State Department of the United States at one point withheld all economic aid. For the past 8 years the Uribe government has defended the work done by top officials of this institution, some of whom are now in prison.

Paramilitary groups maintain their influence in vast regions of the country, engage in the same criminal activity as before and exercise influence on municipal administrations. In the recent elections, in which massive fraud has been confirmed, they played an active role in electing many Congress members who are linked to their groups.

The murder of union leaders is merely the façade of a campaign to discredit unions, erode workers' legal protections and degrade working conditions. In support of this campaign they have resorted to any and all means to weaken or destroy the union movement. In 2009 alone 45 union leaders were killed.

The displacement of communities continues. Millions of Colombians have been driven off their land and suffer in the slums of major cities while their property is monopolized by large land owners, leaders of organized crime and regional politicians. The government has not recovered this land, much less returned it to its rightful owners. To make matters worse, the usurpers have benefited from the scandalous government subsidy program for agribusiness called "Agro Ingreso Seguro", which supports primarily palm oil plantations dedicated to biofuel production.

All of these transgressions have been confirmed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and related cases have also been accepted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the two organizations of the OAS that oversee the application of the agreements concerning these matters. The U.S. State Department's 2009 annual report as well as the report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, go into great detail in these cases. The annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights confirms them as well.

All of these transgressions have occurred during the FTA negotiations and there's no reason to believe that the requirement for future evaluations on a yearly basis is going to change the situation after the FTA goes into effect.

While the FTA itself will be devastating for Colombian agriculture and industry, considering the obviously one-sided economic relationship between Canada y Colombia, and while its implementation will increase the fundamental inequity that lies at the root of the multiple manifestations of violence in Colombia, an important additional reason for opposing ratification is that approval would send a clear message of support to a government that is finishing its term in office faced not only with serious human rights accusations on the international level but also with very serious and well founded charges of corruption, manipulation of elections and restriction of freedom of expression.

Colombian Action Network in Opposition to Free Trade, Recalca

Confederation of Colombian Workers, CUT