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October 2, 2008

Dr. Álvaro Uribe Vélez,
Presidente de Colombia
Palacio de Nariño
Carrera 8 No. 7 -26
Bogotá, Colombia

Dear Mr. President:

The Public Service Alliance of Canada strongly protests the attacks against the more than 10,000 workers in the sugar industry in Colombia who are currently on strike. The refusal by the Sugar Cane Growers' Association ASOCANA, to negotiate better pay, shorter hours, a healthier work environment, better housing and educational facilities for workers and their families, and a formal work contract with labor and union rights is unacceptable and deserving of international attention.

Over 100 workers were left injured on September 15th, when you ordered the military into the mills to remove striking workers. Workers have also received threats from the mill owners who have called upon the national police and private security firms to stop and inspect mill workers, and paramilitary groups who have threatened a number of workers.

The strike comes at a time when the sugar cane growers and processors propose to expand crops to produce bio-diesel fuels as well as sugar. Yet they refuse to consider improvement of working conditions and pay which the sugar cane workers have sought through their union organization. Your actions are undermining Colombian unions and showing callous disregard for union organizing and workers' rights to seek fair pay under safe conditions with reasonable hours.

Mr. President, we strongly urge you to:

- Immediately instruct state forces to halt their aggression against the legitimate protests of the cane cutters;



- Instruct the Attorney General, the Public Prosecutor, and the Peoples' Defender Office to begin immediate investigations into those responsible for the physical attacks against the workers;
- Demand that the Ministry of Work and ASOCANA provide labour guarantees and work contracts with social security benefits, and the guarantee of the rights to free association and unionization to the sugar industry workers;
- Eliminate the system of association and co-operative contracts which are subjecting the workers to unfair and dangerous working conditions. The actions of ASOCANA and the Government of Colombia violate the most fundamental rights inscribed in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the conventions of the International Labour Organization signed and ratified by the Colombian State.

During my recent visit to Colombia, Mr. Fabio Valencia Cossio, Minister of the Interior, and Mr. Andrés Fernando Palacio Chaverra, your Vice-Minister for Labour Relations claimed that respect for workers' rights in Colombia was improving. Regrettably, the attacks against trade union leaders and activists have increased substantially since my visit in July. The recent attacks against the striking sugar cane workers indicate that your government is determined to ignore the most basic labour and human rights. These actions on the part of your government is more evidence that Canada must not sign and implement a trade deal with Colombia.

Sincerely,



John Gordon
National President

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