

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 7, 2017

Paula Gaviria
Presidential Advisor on Human Rights
Palacio de Nariño
Bogota, Colombia

Dear Ms. Gaviria,

We write in regards to the recent protests in the Pacific region of Colombia, particularly in the cities of Buenaventura, Quibdó and Riosucio (Chocó). It is important that the government ensure that the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are able to exercise their right to peaceful protest as guaranteed by the Colombian Constitution.

On Friday, May 19th, following the breakdown of talks between community organizers and the government, the peaceful protests in Buenaventura took a violent turn. It is widely reported that the violence was provoked by Colombia's special anti-riot police force, ESMAD. Reportedly, disproportionate force was used to clear the protesters, including tear gas, helicopters, stun bombs, tanks and firearms. It was reported that the protestors were unarmed and included children, pregnant woman, and elderly adults. There are also reports that looting and other disorderly conduct occurred in the wake of the violent tactics used by ESMAD to disperse the crowd. We have been informed that local fisherman received death threats by the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces (AGC) paramilitary group for participating in these civic actions.

In Riosucio, the primary reason locals were protesting is that the government has not provided them with adequate security from the illegal armed groups operating in the area. The lack of security in the Chocó is leading to selective assassinations, illegal armed groups controlling local populations, and the displacement and confinement of ethnic groups. Given that ports such as those in this region are a priority sector for the U.S.-Colombia Labor Action Plan (PAL), we should be seeing efforts to guarantee dignified, unionized work opportunities for port workers in the Pacific, not the opposite.

The civic activists in the Pacific region were calling for basic human needs such as access to clean drinking water, better infrastructure, improved healthcare, and increased protection against illegal armed groups. Rates of poverty and unemployment are noticeably higher in this region than the national average. Given that the port of Buenaventura is strategically important for Colombia's maritime trade with Asia and the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement and that Chocó is a resource-rich, biodiverse department, racial discrimination would appear to play a role in the inequitable distribution of wealth in the Pacific, which is not reaching the local afro-descendant and indigenous populations.


We are encouraged that the government of Colombia has reached an agreement with the representatives of the civic strike committees in Buenaventura and Chocó, and we will monitor the implementation of these agreements. Going forward, we believe the government should investigate abuses committed by the ESMAD police, sanction persons found guilty of wrongdoing, and take all necessary measures to ensure the safety of future protestors against any threats or attacks by paramilitary groups.


Freedom of association and assembly is crucial to achieving long-lasting peace and stability in any democracy; as such, the Colombian government must ensure that the people of the Pacific region are able to hold peaceful protests freely and without fear of retaliation or repression.

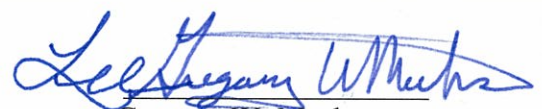
Lastly, the government of Colombia should take concrete action to demonstrate its support for Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities by issuing a decree to make the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Accord legally enforceable. The best way for the government to guarantee effective implementation of the accords in the Pacific region is by fully implementing the Ethnic Chapter, which will address the root causes of the current security and social problems.

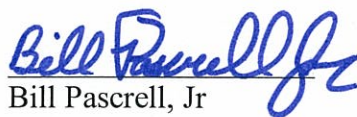
We will continue to monitor this situation and look forward to continuing to work with you to promote peace and justice in Colombia.

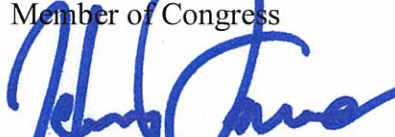
Sincerely,



Keith Ellison
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress

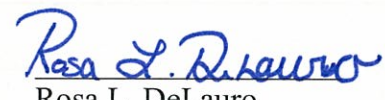

Bill Pascrell, Jr
Member of Congress

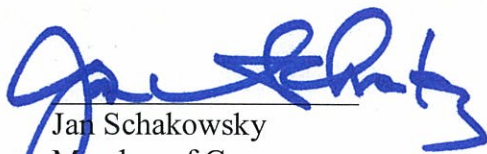

Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress


James P. McGovern
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