

## **OPINION PIECE based on OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT ÁLVARO URIBE VÉLEZ**

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### **Sr. Uribe's dilemma: A firm hand to protect human rights or to violate them?**

On taking office on 7 August, Colombian President, Álvaro Uribe Vélez inherited responsibility for governing a country that stands on the edge of an abyss, a country that has been ripped apart by almost four decades of armed conflict and that has witnessed a continuous increase in the level of political violence.

Colombia's conflict has forced more than two million people from their homes and kills more than 20 people every day, most of them civilians killed in non-combat situations.

The security forces, through their paramilitary allies, continue to systematically violate the population's fundamental rights in their efforts to defeat the armed rebels who, in turn, continue to threaten, kidnap and kill countless civilians.

The people of Colombia are at the mercy of armed groups. Those that seek to defend their own rights or the rights of others suffer persecution, exile and often death, as illustrated by the more than 140 recorded killings and disappearances of trade unionists in 2001 and the constant threats, harassment and murder of human rights defenders.

This complex situation presents the President with a simple choice: he can either adopt the measures necessary to resolve the country's increasingly critical human rights situation, or he can implement policies based on an exclusively military notion of security; if he adopts the latter course, the fundamental rights of a broad spectrum of Colombian society will inevitably be sacrificed. He can choose to accept responsibility for the state's past and present human rights violations and begin serious and exhaustive investigations into these violations; or he can continue with the traditional attitude of previous Colombian governments by covering up the state's role in these violations and attacking individuals who dare to denounce them.

Were he to choose the first option, the President would implement measures recommended repeatedly by the United Nations and many other national and international human rights organizations. These would involve measures to end the prevailing impunity that allows human rights to be violated and international humanitarian law to be ignored; action to confront and isolate the paramilitary groups that continue to enjoy the support of government forces; and provision of effective protection for human rights defenders and other vulnerable sectors of Colombian society.

The President will have to act firmly to dismantle the mechanisms that have ensured the impunity that has been responsible for the thousands of violations committed by the armed forces, the paramilitary groups that frequently act in collusion and complicity with the armed forces, and the guerrilla groups. These mechanisms have, if anything, been strengthened thanks to the persistent lack of interest of successive Colombian governments to identify and prosecute those responsible; all of which has led to yet further abuses being committed against a defenceless population.

The new President's top priority must be to protect the civilian population, especially the sectors most exposed to the armed conflict and political violence, including peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, trade unionists, public service workers, journalists and human rights defenders.

Dr. Uribe has repeatedly proclaimed that security will form the cornerstone of his political program. However, if he does not take the steps necessary to guarantee respect for fundamental rights such as the right to life, physical safety and the right not to be involved in the conflict, any such attempts will prove to be no more than an illusion.

There is a very real risk, however, that the President will opt for a military solution and the introduction of draconian security measures, whatever the cost, rather than a solution based on human rights.

The President's plans for the creation of a militia composed of one million informants to support the armed forces is a clear indication that his strategy will seek to drag the civilian population further into the conflict, rather than to protect

it. This poses a great danger for Colombian society, since it threatens to undermine the security of many Colombians, exposing them to reprisals from both sides.

The message that emerges from many of President Uribe's policy proposals is that human rights will not be a priority for his government and that he is willing to sacrifice human rights on the altar of "security". But if, as is likely, these policies lead to an exacerbation of the already serious human rights crisis and increase the vulnerability of the civilian population by involving them even further in the conflict, then what kind of security will President Uribe really be able to offer his country's citizens?

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