

Chicago, February 24, 2008

Brothers and Sisters of the United States Churches and Communities of Faith,

In November I read in the online version of the *Heraldo of Barranquilla* newspaper that the demobilized paramilitary leader “Don Antonio” admitted he gave the order to kill Jose Humberto Torres, a lawyer and human rights defender. Jose Humberto was declared a military target supposedly because he was a lawyer for the guerrillas, according to intelligence reports given by “El Zarco”, an active paramilitary leader. According to the paramilitary leader, the killing was not able to be carried out because Jose Humberto traveled frequently.

Reading this I became deeply concerned because Jose Humberto and I worked closely together defending human rights in Barranquilla. At times he joined us for meetings of the Coastal Presbytery to help us understand the situation in Colombia. For that reason I wrote to him, expressing my solidarity. I told him that we were praying that God would protect him from those who wanted to kill him. Jose Humberto responded with these words:

“Dear friend, I know that you will do what you can. Thanks for your support and especially for your prayers. At this point in my life, I believe that the prayers of so many have been of great value, the proof that the machinery of death that daily greases the assassin’s wheels has not been able to carry out its terrible plan.”

Brothers and sisters in faith, I share this testimony because the Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia on April 27-28, 2008 are drawing near. As Jose Humberto believed, prayers and actions in solidarity with victims of violence, human rights defenders and communities seeking peaceful alternatives have been extremely valuable in protecting the lives of many people, social and church initiatives and those of us who work for justice and try to live lives in abundance as Jesus proclaimed in the gospel.

Therefore, my goal is to encourage us as Christians, churches and communities of faith to join together and strengthen this movement of prayer and action for Colombia. We see examples that show that God is responding in His different ways but we also know that persecution against victims of violence and human rights defenders in Colombia is on the rise. We have seen this again recently as Colombian government officials have claimed that the FARC guerrillas are behind next month’s march of solidarity and homage to the victims of violence. These kinds of statements continue to provide justification to the paramilitaries to threaten many people and communities that work for human rights while seeking justice and reparations for the millions of internally displaced and the families of the thousands who have been assassinated and massacred.

I believe that your visits to and accompaniment of Colombian communities has allowed you to be witnesses and join in our cries for peace. This is the experience of thousands of displaced persons, indigenous, Afro-Colombians, women and youth who are organized to resist all forms of violence. They are organized to live in peace where they protect each other and together work to keep hope and care for God’s beautiful creation.

To continue supporting and accompanying these peace experiences, it is key that your prayers to God and your actions strengthen the call to the U.S. Congress to end Plan Colombia and to reject the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

As has been proven, Plan Colombia has not met its goal in the Drug War despite so much money spent on weapons and the fumigation of vast swaths of land. This has simply caused more displacement and a humanitarian crisis in many communities living in fumigated areas. At the same time, the Free Trade Agreement would only benefit economic sectors that today carry out agro-industrial projects on land from which millions of people were displaced while thousands more were killed. This would also provide a boost to political factions in the Colombian government who, together with paramilitaries, participated in these crimes.

With our prayers and actions for peace in Colombia during the Days on April 27-28 we will be joining with other social sectors and organizations in the United States and Colombia who believe that human beings can live in peace and we can all enjoy God's blessings.

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