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PRESS RELEASE  
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## **Santos and Obama promise to move forward on Colombia FTA, announcing plan to protect workers: Human rights NGOs agree plan falls short**

Washington, D.C. – The action plan signed today between the U.S. and Colombian governments to advance the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) falls far short of guaranteeing fair and safe conditions in which Colombian workers can exercise their rights and fails to address the broader issues of security and human rights, according to the Latin America Working Group, the U.S. Office on Colombia, and the Washington Office on Latin America.

“We could see the same shocking numbers of murders of trade unionists when the FTA is implemented, and there’s nothing in this agreement or the accord itself that would stop it from going forward,” said Lisa Haugaard, executive director of the Latin America Working Group. Fifty-one trade unionists were [killed](#) in Colombia in 2010, making Colombia still the world leader in anti-union violence.

With the action plan, the Colombian government does commit to some important steps, including expanding protection programs for trade unionists and designating 100 labor inspectors to address abuses committed by the so-called “cooperatives” that limit worker rights. Our organizations appreciate both that the Obama Administration has insisted on this important linkage of advancements in protection of trade unionists as well as labor rights improvements to the FTA, and that the Santos Administration has assumed this challenge. But it takes time as well as political will to ensure that these words and plans lead to a reduction in violence and effective exercise of labor rights. The priority appears to be to finalize this before the end of the year, rather than ensuring real and lasting results.

Moreover, the action plan does little to address the underlying conditions that cause the violence. “The last six months have seen an increase in attacks and threats against community leaders and human rights defenders,” said Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, senior associate at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). “We find it incomprehensible that the plan fails to address steps to dismantle the paramilitaries and successor armed groups that are the source of so much of this brutal violence.”

“The plan includes nothing about gross human rights violations by the Colombian armed forces, except in the cases of anti-union violence,” said Kelly Nicholls, executive director of the U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC). “The Santos Administration has yet to make advances in bringing to justice those responsible for more than 3,000 civilians murdered, allegedly by members of Colombia’s own armed forces. And even those who have been convicted of these crimes are often kept in detention centers that appear more like a luxury resort<sup>[1]</sup> than a prison.”

Beyond the labor and human rights issues, our organizations remain concerned about the potential impact of the trade agreement on Colombian rural communities, including Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples, which have been the most harshly affected by the war.

"We have yet to see any plan from either the U.S. or Colombian governments that spells out how they intend to mitigate the potentially devastating impacts on poor farmers who cannot compete with large-scale, subsidized U.S. farm exports. If this is not addressed, these farmers could be pushed into the illegal market," said Kelly Nicholls of USOC.

"What is the plan to ensure that the alternative development projects the U.S. government heavily supported are not undermined, and that farmers do not return to planting coca?" asked Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli from WOLA. "As the Santos Administration attempts to allow some of the 5.2 million people displaced by violence to return to their lands, what is the plan to ensure that the FTA does not affect their ability to stay?"

The Obama Administration has repeatedly stressed that the Colombia Free Trade Agreement will only advance "in accord with our values." LAWG, USOC, and WOLA agree that we are not yet there.

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[1] <http://www.semana.com/noticias-nacion/tolemaida-resort/154427.aspx>