



May 10, 2021

The Honourable Marc Garneau, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, On K1A 0A2
Vie E-Mail: marc.garneau@parl.gc.ca

Dear Minister Garneau:

Re: Police repression of Protests in Colombia

Warm greetings on behalf of The United Church of Canada. The United Church works toward peace, social justice and sustainable development with about 90 partner organizations in some 30 countries around the world, and with other churches and civil society organizations in Canada. In Colombia, we have a long history of working in partnership with churches, civil society and ecumenical organizations to support the promotion and protection of human rights, the Colombian peace process and a just and equitable society where poverty and threats to life are no longer the reality.

The United Church is deeply concerned about the militarized response of the Colombian government to the ongoing national strike which began April 18, 2021. We welcome your recent statement and your public condemnation of “the disproportionate use of force by security forces and the affirmation of that the right to peaceful assembly and association...must be promoted and protected at all times”. However, given Canada’s investment in the country’s Peace process and its significant economic ties, we urge your government to take immediate steps to exert diplomatic pressure so that police repression and violence against protestors end immediately.

Partners express their deep concern about the police violence against largely peaceful protests. Many of those raising their voices in legitimate, peaceful protest are young people. As part of their ministry, Colombian Methodist pastors are accompanying young adults striking in Cali and confirm the violent repression of peaceful protestors. The Methodist Church of Colombia (IMC), a United Church partner, has affirmed the right of the multitudes



of people who are going out into the streets peacefully, stating that they have every constitutional right to do so. The IMC conceives "almost as our own, the heartbreaking cry of the crowds demanding justice in peaceful street marches ... who from an awareness of just change for all and everyone, raise their voices to make known an absence of [fundamental] rights not only in existence but in quality...." Another partner, the World Student Christian Federation, has urgently called on the Colombian Government to guarantee the safety of all protestors and ensure the appropriate investigation by the Colombian justice system.

While we welcome your encouragement of dialogue, its purpose must not only be to de-escalate tensions, but rather to begin to seriously address the root causes of the mass mobilization of the Colombian people. The Methodist Church of Colombia has named numerous causes for the protests, stating that "if [protesters] were silent, the stones would shout out.":

The IMC describes:

- the fact that the economic measures (tax, labour, and health reform) announced by the government will deepen injustice, existing inequities, and impoverishment and are not based on the daily reality that the majority of Colombians;
- the complicit silence on the part of the government regarding the repeated massacres and assassinations of women and men labour, social organizations and youth leaders, as well as human rights defenders;
- lack of fulfillment of previous agreements regarding various indigenous land rights
- official opposition and apathy at the highest levels that has led to a systematic dismantling and delegitimization of the Peace Accords including the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP);
- shameful acts of corruption within state bodies, exemplified in "unscrupulous and colossal" salaries and allowances for the highest officials, thus squandering the peoples' resources contributed through taxes.

In light of this, we ask the Canadian Government to urge the Colombian Government to convene an authentic and transparent dialogue with the diverse voices that are organizing the national strikes, in order to address the root causes of the protests.

The current crisis highlights the need for Canada to centre its relationship with Colombia on a "whole of government" approach that foregrounds the Human Rights Emergency and the Peace Process at its core. Canada's sale of the Light Armoured Vehicles and Armoured

Personnel Vehicles to Colombia regardless of their intended use is deeply concerning. Ongoing Canadian trade and investment risk contributing to a human rights situation characterized by repression and violence.

I look forward to hearing from you and wish you grace and peace in your daily duties.

Regards,



Christie Neufeldt

Global Partnerships Coordinator
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