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“House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on  
International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight.”

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. It is always a privilege to testify before the elected representatives of our nation. I accepted this invitation because the topic of these hearings is important to our country and to me personally. Moreover, how the US Congress deals with US-Colombian relations in the next few weeks will have a lasting impact on US and regional security and prosperity.

Colombia is an important country, among other factors because of its seldom-recognized strategic value. Colombia is the keystone of South America, with gateways to the Andes Mountains, the Amazon basin, two oceans, and its close proximity to the Panama Canal. Our enemies recognize that significance. And make no mistake, the Marxist guerrillas who have been fighting for nearly five decades to gain control over Colombia are enemies of the United States and of the freedoms we value, as are the drug traffickers, paramilitaries and organized crime syndicates which have destabilized that nation.

A second reason why this hearing is important is because labor freedoms are critical to a free society and free labor is a pillar of Colombian democracy. The fascist dictators of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from Lenin to Hitler to Castro, followed a pattern: to gain absolute power, they needed to take over, to command but not destroy civil institutions. The first two targets, almost invariably, were the press and the labor unions.

To me personally, labor unions are important because my mother was a proud member of the Telephone Workers Confederation of Cuba, a union which no longer exists. It does not exist because all unions in Cuba, as in all communist countries, were replaced by one union controlled by the ruling party in the name of workers who no longer have any voice in their affairs. Many Cuban labor leaders, including some with whom my mother worked, were executed by Fidel Castro for opposing his version of the Workers' Paradise. As the US Congress looks for ways to strengthen labor freedoms in Colombia, it must take particular care not to undermine the very system which has enabled those freedoms to survive and improve.

There is no question that violence has been a problem in Colombia, but not only against labor leaders. We should put this issue in perspective. When I was sworn in as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs in January of 2002, barely 5 years ago, the big debate inside the US Government centered on how long the government of Colombia could survive. Most of the national territory was outside of the government's control, and the government's hold on power was so tenuous that it had ceded to the FARC guerrillas a region the size of Switzerland. Tens of thousands of paramilitaries, narco-traffickers and Communist guerrillas fought each other and government forces simultaneously. This led educated Colombians to flee their country in droves, taking their

money with them. The U.S. embassy in Bogotá faced an 18-month backlog of applications from 180,000 Colombians seeking permanent residence in the U.S. There were daily reports of massacres and atrocities committed by all sides.

While Colombia is still far from lasting peace, its situation has improved. The US revamped intelligence-sharing with Colombia, and offered it greater economic and military assistance. Having built on these changes, the government of President Álvaro Uribe now controls all 1,092 of the national municipalities. Rightist paramilitaries have surrendered by the tens of thousands, and the Marxist guerrillas have been degraded and forced to retreat deep into the jungle. The economy is growing at more than 5 percent per year; in the past five years close to 2 million jobs have been created; capital flight has been reversed; and Colombian professionals and managers no longer flee but are returning to rebuild their country. Violence against labor has declined to the point that the International Labor Organization has taken Colombia off its so-called black list of violators of labor rights. Colombia had been on the list for 30 years.

In the past 5 years, terrorist attacks are down by 61%, assassinations of labor leaders down by 75%, of mayors down by 58% and of journalists by 73%. Even one murder is too many. But the downward trend is impressive and encourages us to think that Colombia is on the path to eliminating this kind of violence all together.

I commend the Committee for looking into the issue of violence in Colombia. I hope it will recognize the progress which is being made by our two countries working together and give credit to where credit is due. This progress is due to closer US-Colombia cooperation, to the bipartisan support which Plan Colombia illustrates and makes possible, and to the courageous leadership of President Alvaro Uribe and his team of honest and dedicated civilian officials, police and military personnel.

I hope the Committee will look at the numbers, look at the progress in prosecutions, in reduction of violence against labor leaders. The Government of Colombia should be applauded and rewarded by approving the Free Trade Agreement, expanding and aid, so it can carry out more reforms and create more good jobs. By helping pacify the country, Plan Colombia is helping trade union members to have more jobs and better working conditions. By restoring the power of the state and the rule of law, President Uribe is promoting labor freedoms as well as other liberties. Why would some want to stop that progress by opposing the Free Trade Agreement or Plan Colombia?

It is commendable that this Committee is looking into the issue of labor freedom and violence against labor leaders. I look forward to similar hearings about violations of labor freedom next door in Venezuela, where a government that calls itself socialist is attempting to replace free labor unions with a single government controlled union, and to extinguish labor rights altogether, as in Cuba. And I look forward to US labor unions and religious and human rights organizations clamoring just as loudly for labor freedom in Venezuela and Cuba as they do for Colombia. Unfortunately, too many have been silent in the face of those massive violations of rights.

Thank you