

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
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ORAL STATEMENT

16th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

Date: March 23, 2011
Item: 2 & 10 - General Debate
Topic: Report of the High Commissioner of Human Rights: Attacks on Lawyers in Colombia
NGO: Joint Statement of Lawyers Rights Watch Canada and the International Commission of Jurists.
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Lawyers Rights Watch Canada calls upon the High Commissioner to recommend that Colombia abide by the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers so that lawyers can fulfill their critical role of defending rights and the rule of law without risk to their personal and professional safety. The Government of Colombia must provide adequate assurances that lawyers can practice their profession without improper interference.

We agree with the High Commissioner that it is “essential to advance the judicial proceedings” to prevent and punish violations of human rights in Colombia. We regret that the High Commission’s report contains no reference to the many lawyers who have been killed and those who continue to be at risk because of their human rights advocacy. Justice is possible only if lawyers can practice their profession freely. Only then is it possible to “advance judicial proceedings,” to develop an effective justice system in Colombia, to obtain reparation for victims and prosecute offenders.

The “International Caravana of Jurists,” consisting of 57 lawyers from 15 countries visited Colombia in August, 2010 to assess these grave issues. Members of the *Caravana* who met with victims, lawyers, and government officials heard of many cases where lawyers had been threatened, harassed and assassinated by illegal armed groups, guerillas and state actors.

In addition, lawyers in Colombia are often stigmatized and put at risk by being identified with their clients in violation of the *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers* which provides that “lawyers shall not be identified with their clients and their clients' causes.”

While we welcome the land restitution policy of President Santos, we fear that many lawyers who work on implementing this policy will become victims of grave attacks.

President Santos has made a “firm and undeniable” commitment to defending human rights. Vice President Angelino Garzon recently reiterated this commitment and promised that his government will end attacks on lawyers in Colombia.

Lawyers Rights Watch Canada asks the High Commissioner to recommend that the Government of Colombia follow up on these important promises. In particular, we urge the High Commissioner to ask the Government of Colombia to publish information about the state of investigations into continuing threats to lawyers and other members of the legal community.