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May 3, 2021

BY E-MAIL

The Right Honorable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
Justin.Trudeau@parl.gc.ca

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau:

Violence in Colombia

On behalf of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), we are writing to express alarm and deep concern at the militarized response of the Colombian government to the ongoing national strike which began on April 28. Human rights organizations report that at least 21 civilians have been killed at the hands of security forces, with many more injured. There are widespread reports of the use of live firearms against unarmed civilians, and indiscriminate violence against citizens participating in protests. We are calling on the Canadian Government to condemn this violence, to call on the Colombian Government to release all political prisoners, and to hold accountable the perpetrators of the human rights violations.

Organizers of the strike report that millions of people have taken part in peaceful protests around the country against the widely unpopular tax reform, which was withdrawn on May 2. Human rights organizations have reported how acts of vandalism from unidentified individuals and groups have been used as justification for a massive military deployment to Colombian cities, and in particular in the city of Cali. We note the comments of Defence Minister Diego Molano on April 30, “*since last night we have strengthened the number of security forces on the streets [of Cali] with more than 2500 units, including 500 from the ESMAD anti-disturbance squadron, 1800 regular police and 700 soldiers*”. Since this militarized deployment, human rights organizations have reported a brutal crackdown on protests and widespread, systematic human rights abuses in cities across the country, including:

- 21 civilians killed by security forces (this figure is likely higher but many cases are still being verified). This included a 17-year-old boy who was shot and killed by a police officer in the Mariano Ramos neighbourhood of Cali. Videos circulating on social media show that the unarmed boy was shot in the back as he ran away from the officer;
- Two civilians raped by members of the security forces, and one case of sexual assault;

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MARK HANCOCK
National President/Président national

CHARLES FLEURY
National Secretary-Treasurer/Secrétaire-trésorier national

BENOÎT BOUCHARD, PAUL FAORO, FRED HAHN, JUDY HENLEY, SHERRY HILLIER
General Vice-Presidents/Vice-présidences générales

- Widespread use of live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas against peaceful protestors;
- Mass arbitrary detentions of peaceful protestors and in some cases human rights defenders. There are multiple reports of physical abuse of detainees; Use of sports facilities as irregular mass detention centres for detainees, in contravention of international law

The demonstrations against the tax reform have become a catalyst for the collective expression of citizens' frustrations and widespread social discontent over mass-impoverishment and exclusion of vast sectors of the society. There has been a huge increase in the number of people living in poverty and it is becoming clear that Colombia is in the midst of a deep social and political crisis. That President Iván Duque was forced to withdraw the regressive tax reform plan is a victory for poor and middle-class citizens and the civil society protesters, but it does not absolve the Government of Colombia from taking responsibility for the violence and holding accountable the perpetrators of the human rights violations.

The current crisis requires an urgent response from the international community. We are calling on the Canadian Government to condemn this violence, and to call on the Government of Colombia to:


- To immediately halt the human rights violations taking place against civilians engaging in protest, and to guarantee the safety of all of those in line with internationally recognised human rights standards;
- To investigate and bring to justice all members of state security agencies responsible for human rights violations during the strike;
- To refrain from criminalisation and stigmatisation of peaceful protests;
- To urgently engage in a wide-ranging social dialogue and genuinely listen to all sectors of the population to find a solution to the immediate crisis in the country. It is vital that all marginalised and disenfranchised sectors of Colombian society can fully participate in such a dialogue.

We trust you will take seriously this urgent request.

Yours truly,



MARK HANCOCK
National President



CHARLES FLEURY
National Secretary Treasurer

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cc: Presidente Iván Duque Marquéz
The Honourable Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs Canada
The Honourable Michael D. Chong, Official Opposition, Foreign Affairs Critic
MP Jack Harris, NDP Foreign Affairs Critic
Ambassador Marcel Lebleu
Embassy of Colombia in Canada