

Excmo. Sr. Presidente Gustavo Petro Urrego President of the Republic of Colombia contacto@presidencia.gov.co	Sra. Luz Adriana Camargo Attorney General of Colombia despacho.fiscal@fiscalia.gov.co
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October 23, 2024

Dear President Petro and Attorney General Camargo:

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding the violent attack on community leader **Edwin Polanco**, which took place on September 23, at approximately 1:30 p.m., in the hamlet of El Carmelo, Cajibío, Cauca Department. During a community assembly led by Edwin, armed men burst into the meeting and shot him, inflicting serious injuries. The community residents who were gathered there immediately transported him to a hospital in the municipal capital. Due to the severity of his injuries, he was later transferred to the city of Popayán.

Edwin Polanco is a well-respected campesino leader who served as a councilor of Cajibío from 2016 to 2019. His leadership in advocating for rural communities and his organizational efforts among local farmers have made him a vital figure in the area. The attack on him is a blow to the community and highlights the worsening violence in Cajibío, which endangers both the autonomy of the communities and their survival in the territory.


Adding to the growing sense of fear, the lifeless body of peasant leader **Carlos Andrés Becoche Zambrano** was found on the night of October 9, after being kidnapped by an armed group three days prior in the Cenequeta area of Cajibío. His body, bearing multiple bullet wounds, was discovered by community residents. This tragic end has devastated the community.

These cases are highlighting again the dangerous environment facing rural leaders in Cajibío. The ongoing conflict in the department of Cauca has escalated alarmingly, leaving civilians exposed to armed confrontations by illegal structures like the FARC dissident group Columna Jaime Martínez. Military responses have failed to protect the rights and security of the civilian population. The uncertainty arising from the crisis in peace negotiations under the government's Total Peace Policy has further exacerbated the situation of rural communities.

We strongly urge that your government:

- conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the attack on Edwin Polanco and the murder of Carlos Andrés Becoche Zambrano, publish the findings, and hold those responsible to account.
- strengthen protections for social leaders and peasant communities who are facing severe risks of violence and intimidation, in strict accordance with their wishes
- publicly denounce attacks against community leaders and implement new strategies to ensure their safety.

Sincerely,


Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinator


Christine L. Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Augusto Rodríguez Ballesteros, Director of the National Protection Unit (UNP) ~ via email
Daniel García-Peña, Ambassador of Colombia to the US ~ via email, US mail
José Luis Caballero Ochoa, Rapporteur for Colombia, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) ~ via email, US mail
UN: Juliette De Rivero, Representative in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights ~ via email
CIJP: Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz / Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace
US Embassy: Francisco Palmieri (Chargé d'Affaires, ad interim); Adam Levy (human rights) ~ via email
US State Department: Desk Officer for Colombia ~ via email
US Senators from Ohio: Brown & Vance ~ via email
US Representatives from Ohio: Beatty, Brown, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Miller, Sykes ~ via email

The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: