




HOW THE THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION CAN PROTECT AND SUPPORT SOCIAL LEADERS IN COLOMBIA

The historic 2016 peace accords, a legacy of the Obama-Biden administration due to its key support for negotiations, are at risk due to the Iván Duque government's weak implementation and commitment. Colombia remains one of the most dangerous countries on earth to be a human rights defender, community activist, Indigenous or Afro-descendant leader, or environmental activist.

To address these perils, the Biden-Harris administration should:


Make clear to the Colombian government that the U.S. government's top priorities on Colombia are consolidating peace and upholding human rights, particularly protection of human rights defenders and social leaders, especially Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples, labor activists, and rural farmers.

- **Ensure whole-of-government messaging on support for a)** implementation of the historic 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, and **b)** protection of human rights defenders and activists.
 - Peace accord implementation must include an emphasis on implementing comprehensive rural reforms, the Ethnic Chapter and transitional justice.
 - Protection for human rights defenders and social leaders means improving individual and collective protection, investigating and prosecuting attacks and threats against social leaders (both those who pull the trigger and the persons behind the attack), and fully dismantling the paramilitary networks behind many of those threats and attacks.
- **Designate a U.S. special envoy for peace in Colombia.** This person would work to monitor and facilitate the implementation of the 2016 FARC peace accord with a particular focus on the Ethnic Chapter. This person would also work to establish a humanitarian dialogue between Colombia and guerrilla group the National Liberation Army (ELN), encouraging negotiations on a peace agreement with the ELN should circumstances permit. They should support humanitarian accords in Choco, Arauca, Catatumbo and elsewhere that uphold humanitarian minimums and protect civilians caught in the conflict.
- **Work with Congress to increase aid to Colombia for peace accord implementation focused on human rights, ethnic minorities, and transitional justice.** This should include financial support via USAID to rural reform efforts, victims' organizations, Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, and justice and reconciliation efforts like the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), and the Unit to Search for the Disappeared.

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- **Use all policy and funding mechanisms available, including withholding and substantial reduction of Foreign Military Financing and Department of Defense (DOD) assistance, to press the Colombian government and armed forces to hold accountable those responsible within the armed forces and intelligence services for human rights abuses and illegal surveillance.**
 - Urge Colombia's Attorney General's Office to effectively investigate illegal surveillance and continue prosecutions of high-level officials implicated in extrajudicial executions, essential for pressure on military officials to cooperate with the transitional justice system.
 - **Reprioritize, revive, and strengthen the mechanisms created within the U.S. government to implement and monitor the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan of Racial and Ethnic Equality (CAPREE) and, at the Department of Labor, the U.S.-Colombia Labor Action Plan.** Emphasize strengthening freedom of association, ending impunity for violence against trade unionists, improving labor inspections, and increasing sanctions for illegal labor subcontracting, which are part of Colombia's obligations under OECD ascension as well as under the U.S.-Colombia Labor Action Plan.
 - **Be cautious about top-line statements that celebrate “the U.S.-Colombia partnership”** which can serve to undercut a message that identifies progress on peace, military reform, and human rights as fundamental U.S. priorities.

Take advantage of the opportunity provided by the peace accords to carry out a more sustainable solution to drug trafficking and production. U.S. support should adhere to the letter and spirit of the accords' drug policy chapter, which focuses on working collaboratively with farmers, using community buy-in to voluntarily eradicate and replace coca sustainably.

- **Strongly support Colombian efforts to bring civilian state presence into ungoverned areas in order to provide basic services, guarantee land tenure, and implement the peace accord's rural reform chapter.** Be aware that forced coca eradication uncoupled with basic services violates the peace accord and will prolong the coca economy, as it has in the past
- **Do not provide support or advice for programs that emphasize forced eradication of coca, including aerial herbicide spraying.** With Colombia poised to restart its aerial spraying program, this undermines the accords and will drive farmers and communities away from cooperating. These forced coca eradication programs are harmful to farming communities, human health, and the environment, and are not effective in reducing coca cultivation in the long term. Instead, reaffirm U.S. commitment and focus on working with communities to eradicate and replace coca voluntarily and permanently.
- **Guarantee that the right to previous consultation is respected with Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities when designing and implementing anti-narcotics policies in their collective territories.** Work with Colombia to develop more robust, bilateral drug policy goals that focus on reducing the amount of families that depend on coca for survival, instead of relying on un-



proven metrics like hectares eradicated. The metrics should not focus solely on the coca numbers but on strengthening institutions, meeting farmers' basic needs and developing their local economies.

- **The State Department, Defense Department, and Southern Command should urge the Colombian government to more effectively dismantle the paramilitary and organized crime networks involved in drug trafficking and organized crime, and to investigate and punish all official collusion with those networks.** This message will be most credible if funding assistance shifts away from support for military and police forces and toward community-based development.

This document draws heavily from a previous WOLA publication, [“To Reverse Trump’s Disastrous Legacy in Latin America, Here Are Key Actions the Biden Administration Should Take in its First Year”](#) (January 2021), and from a report co-authored by WOLA and partners including the Latin America Working Group (LAWG): [Protect Colombia’s Peace](#) (July 2020).
