

## **Joint Statement Canada-Colombia Human Rights Deal “Empty”: Civil Society Leaders**

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*Ottawa* –The Liberals today closed ranks with the Conservatives in passing legislation that brought two years of vigorous public debate to an end—and finalized a free trade deal alongside a new human rights agreement with Colombia that civil society leaders say lowers the bar on human rights.

“This new human rights agreement is empty. It does nothing to repair Canada’s sullied human rights reputation in the world,” said Gerry Barr, President-CEO of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC). “It also sets a limiting and therefore dangerous precedent for other trade agreements, including the one being currently negotiated between the United States and Colombia.”

The Liberal and Conservative endorsement of the free trade agreement (FTA) between Colombia and Canada was linked to a controversial side agreement with the Government of Colombia. The final version of this side deal—which is significantly different from what independent human rights groups were calling for—allows both the Canadian and Colombian governments to write their own human rights reports on the impacts of the FTA. The FTA had been held up in parliament since it was signed in November of 2008, given widespread public concerns in Canada about implementing a trade deal with one of the worst human rights violators in the hemisphere.

“Defending workers rights in Colombia is a death sentence,” says Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti. “48 of 100 union assassinations worldwide in 2009 took place in Colombia—almost half. Few if any of the perpetrators of these crimes are in jail. Ratifying the FTA now signals that Canada condones this vicious reality for Colombian workers.”

In June 2008, the Parliamentary Standing Committee for International Trade recommended that the trade deal not be ratified until there had been a substantive improvement in the human rights situation in Colombia, and until an independent and prior human rights impact assessment of the trade agreement was undertaken. The final side deal to the free trade agreement does not take into account either of these strong recommendations.

“The reports being promised in the new side agreement will lack credibility if they are not produced by independent experts,” warns Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada. “And there is no enforcement mechanism to ensure that any concerns identified in the reports will be addressed and resolved. This side agreement allows the governments to check a few boxes and pat themselves on the back.”

Last year, threats and killings of Indigenous Colombians increased. Afro-Colombian communities too continue to suffer threats and attacks aimed at displacing them from lands of interest to foreign mining, oil and gas companies. More than 286,000 people were forcibly displaced in 2009, with the total close to four million people. Of equal concern are revelations

that Colombia's civilian intelligence service, under the direct authority of the President, has been involved in massive, illegal espionage against human rights organizations, opposition politicians, judges and journalists, in close cooperation with paramilitary death squads to threaten and silence opponents.

"This should have been a no-brainer. The tragic testimony from witnesses in Colombia and Canada and the thousands of emails and calls MPs have received all reinforced the need to seriously consider the human rights impact free trade would have on Colombian people and communities," says Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians. "I'm angry the Harper government has rushed into ransacking the democratic process to push through a free trade deal that will exacerbate the human rights crisis in Colombia."

To date, the Obama administration has not moved on ratifying the U.S. trade agreement with Colombia, given concerns about widespread continued rights violations. But the Canadian position is closely monitored in Washington, and passage of the Canadian deal may add pressure on Congress to relent on its concerns for human rights.

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