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10 August 2010

## **Former Colombian president with bloody record of human rights abuses joins UN team investigating Israel's flotilla attack**

***Joint statement by the Latin America Solidarity Centre and Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign***

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010, the Israeli government announced it would cooperate with one of two UN-sponsored investigations into the May 31<sup>st</sup> Flotilla Massacre – a move which UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon claimed was “unprecedented”. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Israel is only willing to co-operate with the inquiry because it expects the members of the UN commission to deliver a biased, inaccurate report that whitewashes the Israeli army.

The commission is composed of four people, one chosen by Turkey, one chosen by Israel and two chosen from a list provided from Israel. The latter two are New Zealand prime minister Geoffrey Palmer, who will be the Chair, and outgoing Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who will serve as Vice-Chair. **The choice of Mr Uribe is as perplexing as it is shocking, and casts doubt on the whole investigation.**

Álvaro Uribe has been a controversial president whose regime engaged in severe human rights abuses. The Colombian state has an ugly record of complicity with paramilitary death squads responsible for thousands of murders. Victims include trade unionists, peasant leaders, opposition politicians and human rights defenders. Over 2,700 trade union members have been assassinated since 1986, making Colombia by far the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. 573 of these murders have taken place since Uribe first became president<sup>i</sup>. The Colombian army has routinely killed civilians, then dressed their dead bodies in the uniforms of left-wing guerrillas (this is known as the “false positives” scandal)<sup>ii</sup>. Colombia's intelligence services have kept trade unionists and human rights defenders under illegal surveillance, and passed on information to the far-right paramilitaries so that these activists can be targeted and killed<sup>iii</sup>.

Public officials in Colombia constantly attack human rights defenders and members of the political and social opposition as “accomplices of terrorism”. These attacks create a climate in which such people can be murdered with impunity. Mr Uribe himself led the way as Colombian president, describing human rights NGOs as “*rent-a-mobs at the service of terrorism*”. Mr Uribe denounced Amnesty International (“*they give legitimacy to terrorism*”), and dubbed Human Rights Watch director José Miguel Vivanco “*a FARC defender [and] accomplice*” when his organisation criticised Colombia's record of human rights violations.

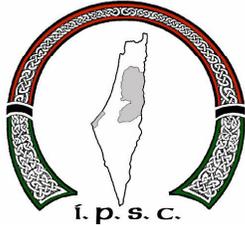
In June 2010, an international human rights mission in Colombia investigated the biggest mass grave in the Western Hemisphere, which had just been discovered in the town of La Macarena. It contained some 2,000 victims of extra-judicial execution that had been dumped there since 2004 – all during Mr Uribe's time in office. At the same time, the Colombian president travelled to the area. However, Mr Uribe did not go to express his condolences to the victims' families, nor to guarantee that a human rights investigation would determine what had happened there. Instead he went to visit the local military base – staffed by exactly the same people that, according to victims' reports, had filled the mass grave with its grisly contents - to praise them for their work:

**“The terrorists' spokespeople are talking of peace to have a break in order to recover, before we achieve our final victory. Terrorism combines means of struggle, so some of their spokespeople talk of peace; others come here to La Macarena to look for ways to discredit the Armed Forces and to implicate it in human rights violations. We will not fall into that trap, stay firm!”<sup>iv</sup>**

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It is hard to believe that Mr Uribe has been selected to join a UN human rights commission despite his own appalling record.

It is also hard to believe that a representative of the Colombian state can be in any way impartial in relation to Israel. For many years, there have been close links between the military establishments of the two countries. The Israeli war industry is now the leading source of arms purchases for the Colombian army:

**“In recent years, Israel has become Colombia's number one weapon supplier [...] These weapons include drones, light arms and ammunition, observation and communication systems and even special bombs capable of destroying coca fields.”<sup>v</sup>**

Both Israel and Colombia are among the world's largest recipients of US military aid. The two states have the same ideological approach to their respective conflicts, insisting that respect for human rights is a non-issue when it comes to pursuing their military goals against rebel groups. When Colombian foreign minister Jaime Bermúdez visited Israel in April 2010, he assured his hosts of continued support:

**“Whoever wins [Colombia's] presidential election next month will be supportive of [Israel]. I admire your people. I admire your country and I admire you. You have many friends in Colombia.”<sup>vi</sup>**

There can be no doubt that Israel only agreed to co-operate with this particular UN inquiry as there is very little chance the commission will tell the truth about the Israeli attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. Indeed, Israel has declined to co-operate with the other UN commission into the attack appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. Colombian participation in a whitewash of the brutal murder of human rights activists will serve the military objectives of both Israel and Colombia as they seek to undermine human rights defenders and “enemy communities” in their respective countries.

In conclusion, it is our belief that this is a maverick commission lacking any serious credibility, and will serve only to show the influence of the United States and Israel on Mr. Ban Ki Moon's office. The commission will disappoint anyone expecting a neutral, impartial investigation that reveals the truth about the massacre of May 31<sup>st</sup>.

**Issued by: Latin American Solidarity Centre and Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign**

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<sup>i</sup> <http://colombiareports.com/colombia-news/news/8053-40-trade-unionists-murdered-in-2009.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8038399.stm>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4378326.stm>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://elespectador.com/noticias/paz/articulo-215260-voceros-del-terrorismo-estan-proponiendo-paz-poderse-recuperar-uribe>

<sup>v</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/8nvtf6> (Ynet News)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Article.aspx?id=174358>

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