



December 22, 2020

Rep. Rosa DeLauro  
Rep. Eliot Engle  
Rep. Deb Haaland  
Rep. Hank Johnson  
Rep. Mark Pocan  
Rep. James McGovern

Re: Urgent Action Needed to Protect Displaced Afro-Colombian Leaders

Dear Honorable Members of the U.S. Congress,

We write to you respectfully to bring to your attention the grave threats facing two Afro-Colombian women leaders of the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) in Cali, Colombia. Their situations were reported to the Attorney General's office and protection measures were requested from the National Protection Unit (NPU)<sup>1</sup>. While the response from the NPU leaders is in process, these women are at high risk of serious harm. As such, we ask that you please use your good offices to encourage the Colombian government to prioritize guaranteeing their safety and security.

Below you will find a summary of each leader's case and actions required from the Colombian government:

***Silvia Helen Rodríguez Quintero***

Silvia Helen Rodríguez Quintero is the president of the Community Action Group in the Villa San Marcos neighborhood of Cali and the legal representative of the Arts and Trades Foundation for Vulnerable Afro-descendant Women (*Fundación de Artes Y Oficios para Mujeres Vulnerables Afrodescendientes*), one of AFRODES' member organizations.

On December 10th, Silvia suffered an attempt on her life at the Foundation's soup kitchen, narrowly surviving a bullet wound to her neck.<sup>2</sup> She is currently recovering at a secure location provided by the Secretary for Public Security and Justice of the Office of the Mayor of Cali. The Secretary's office provides protection for 15 days, with the possibility of another 15-day extension. However, the level of protection she was offered is not sufficient given the immediate threat to Silvia's life. Furthermore, beneficiaries of this

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<sup>1</sup> Our organizations are asking the NPU use its authority under Decree 1066 (2015) and Resolution 805 (2012) to implement protection measures that will protect these leaders' safety and their ability to continue working for the human rights of Afro-Colombians.

<sup>2</sup> AFRODES' press release about the incident can be accessed at this link (Spanish): <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sWsB16wWgqw3igzobRjjWaL4TVMXciDw/view>

protection are required to remain indoors throughout their stay, causing negative psychological impacts.

As such, the National Protection Unit should be encouraged to:

- 1) Implement emergency protection measures for Silvia, including bodyguards and an armored vehicle, while carrying out the risk evaluation process to determine her entry into the full protection program.
- 2) Coordinate with the Office of the Mayor of Cali, the Unit for Attention and Reparations to Victims, and the *Defensoría del Pueblo* (Ombudsman) to ensure that Silvia can be relocated to another part of Cali along with her family.

### ***Ruby Cortes Castro***

Ruby Cortes Castro is an AFRODES leader in Cali and the mother of Jair Andrés Cortes. Jair formed part of the five men killed in the Llano Verde massacre that took place on August 11.<sup>3</sup> After speaking out about this horrific crime, Ruby received a death threat on September 4 in the form of a pamphlet at her home warning her to “keep her mouth shut” and stop seeking justice for her son. Ruby reported the threat to the Attorney General’s office on September 5 and requested protection from the National Protection Unit on October 1. To date, she has received no response from the Unit.

AFRODES’ leaders have faced threats, attacks, and killings since the organizations’ founding. To prevent further killings, the Colombian government must strengthen its protective measures for social leaders, especially for leaders who are already facing specific threats.

We respectfully request that your offices encourage the Colombian government to:

- 1) Direct the National Protection Unit to implement emergency protection measures for these two leaders immediately. Given the imminent and specific risks that they are facing, the Unit has the authority to implement these measures immediately while the risk evaluation process is still underway.
- 2) Urge the *Fiscalía General*’s office to investigate these attacks and bring those responsible to justice with urgency.
- 3) Urge the *Procuraduría General* (Inspector General) and the *Defensoría del Pueblo* to follow up on the actions of the National Protection Unit and the *Fiscalía General* so as to provide accountability for their responsibilities to Silvia and Ruby.
- 4) Urge the Unit for Attention and Reparations to Victims, the Office of the Mayor of Cali, and the Departmental Government of Valle del Cauca to contribute to the implementation of protective measures.

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<sup>3</sup> Race and Equality’s report on the incident can be accessed at this link (English): <https://raceandequality.org/english/race-and-equality-condemns-the-murder-of-five-young-afro-colombians-in-cali-and-issues-recommendations-for-ensuring-truth-and-preventing-future-killings/>

We thank you for your attention to this letter, and we remain available to provide any additional information that you may require.

Sincerely,

**Marino Córdoba**

President

National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES)

**Gimena Sanchez Garzoli**

Director for the Andes

WOLA: Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas

**Carlos Quesada**

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