

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1304

August 10, 2021

Antony John Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 "C" Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, we are deeply concerned about grave human rights abuses committed by Colombia's Security Forces – in particular Colombia's National Police, the riot police (*Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios*, ESMAD) – against Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples in the context of national protests.

Fifty-five members of Congress wrote to you on May 14, 2021, urging that the State Department: suspend U.S. direct assistance to Colombia's National Police until there are improvements in the use of force by these forces; ensure judicial accountability for abuses that have taken place during the 2019, 2020 and 2021 protests; guarantee that ESMAD is not receiving assistance from the U.S.; freeze U.S. sales of weapons, equipment and training to the ESMAD and other riot or crowd control equipment to the Colombian security forces, police and special units; and publicly reject Colombian officials' stigmatizing statements against protests.

In the absence of strong U.S. actions to curb the violence, many more abuses are occurring. According to *Temblores'* GRITA platform, a total of 4,285 cases of police violence were registered between the morning of April 28 and the afternoon of June 16. These abuses include: 1,468 victims of physical violence by the police, 30 cases of improper use of the Venom projectile weapon by the riot police (ESMAD), 1,832 protestors arbitrarily detained, 734 violent interventions by the police, 70 victims of eye injuries, 215 cases of police shooting firearms, 28 victims of sexual violence by the police, and 41 cases of persons suffering from respiratory problems due to the use of tear gas. They also registered 43 cases of homicides within the context of the protests, with an additional 21 in the process of being verified.

We are very concerned about the racialized aspects of this violence. This trend deepens an already troubling structural racism that has placed Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples at a disadvantage in terms of human rights abuses, justice, employment, and access to basic services. The NGO the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) recently issued a report that identified practices of racial profiling and territorial exclusion in the midst of protests. The NGO found that up until May 18, of the 39 people who had been killed between Cali and Jumbo, 11 were Afro-descendants, with a large number of the remainder unable to establish their origin. Of the five murders that took place in Jumbo, an area with a large Afro-descendant population, at least one of the persons killed was Black. When it comes to forced disappearances, in the majority of cases, the location of where the disappearance took place is not registered. Yet, existing data up until May 13 found that 22 forced disappearances occurred in places with a medium or high concentration of Afro-descendants. New cases have occurred since then and the majority of victims are youths under the age of 30.

A second report by the Black Communities Process titled: the "*Report on the State of Human Rights of Afro-descendants in the framework of the national strike*" reports that between April 28 to May 26, 2021,

more than 162 attacks by the police and ESMAD occurred in Cali. The areas most attacked are those where the Afro-descendant population resides, such as Puerto Rellena (Puerto Resistencia), the Thousand Days / Struggles Bridge in Alfonso López, Calipso-Puerto Madera, Siloe, La Luna, among others. The report also found 15 acts of gender-based violence against Afro-descendant women and more than 71 Afro-descendant victims in the context of the protests.

Additionally, indigenous people have suffered numerous attacks by the public forces during the period of these protests. On May 9, there was an attack by armed civilians in Jamundi (Valle del Cauca) against indigenous persons on their way to participate in the protests in Cali. The discriminatory remarks by high-level officials as a response to the attack are particularly distressing. Video of the incident shared on social media shows armed civilians shooting at indigenous persons right in front of the police. These armed civilians, dressed in white and traveling in vans, were stationed at several points along the road. They were not apprehended by the police. Rather, they threatened the indigenous people and shot them, leaving nine indigenous people injured including the leader of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (*Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca*, CRIC) Youth Movement Daniela Soto, who suffered a serious wound in the abdomen, and indigenous authority of the López Adentro reservation Jerson Tálaga, who was also wounded by a firearm. The police officers not only did not act to protect these persons, but some awaited the wounded at the hospitals to prosecute them. Afterwards, untruthful, and blatantly racist statements were made by the national police and President Duque about the incident. This kind of stigmatization, common towards the indigenous in Colombia, is highly problematic because it makes them targets of the illegal, vigilante armed groups and results in resentment and anger towards them by the Colombian people.

On racial discrimination, we were very disturbed to read African American actor Kendrick Sampson's [Op-ed](#) that ran in *El Espectador* on June 20, which details the horrifying racially biased attack he endured from the Colombian police in Cartagena in December 2020.

We encourage you to fully implement the recommendations made in the May 14th letter. Colombia is a strong ally of the United States that receives foreign assistance and military training. Our two countries have worked together on the U.S.-Colombia Racial Action Plan and the U.S. Colombia Labor-Action Plan, which include sectors such as sugar and ports that employ a large number of ethnic minorities. Our foreign assistance administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has a particular program to address the concerns of Afro-Colombians and Indigenous communities. Within the international community, the U.S. has spearheaded efforts to address human rights abuses committed against ethnic minorities. We have invested much political and financial capital in advancing the 2016 Peace Agreement and guaranteeing the integration of the Ethnic Chapter.

We, therefore, ask that in addition to acting on the requests made in the May 14th letter:

- 1) The Department of State should organize a high-level dialogue between Colombia and the United States in 2021 within the framework of the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Racial and Ethnic Equality (CAPREE) to address police brutality, racist violence and racial discrimination against Afro-Colombians and indigenous leaders and communities. Such an exchange should incorporate the indigenous and Afro-Colombian territorial authorities of cabildos and community councils, as well as the Ethnic Commission for Peace and the Defense of Territorial Rights and other representative organizations. This exchange must include engagement with U.S. civil rights and civil society organizations that work on Colombia.
- 2) President Biden, Vice President Harris and Ambassador Goldberg should make public statements denouncing the racist violence and abuses committed against Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities and urge the Colombian authorities to prioritize investigations on racial violence

and show results of the intellectual and material authors in such cases beginning with the May 9 attack against the indigenous convoy in Jamundi. They should send a clear message to the government of Colombia that for the U.S. government the rights of ethnic minorities are a priority and that the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 peace accord must be fully implemented.

- 3) Security assistance to Colombia should be put on hold until: the Colombia security forces, national police and ESMAD cease the disproportionate use of force, misuse of crowd control weapons and abuses against rightful protestors, and until such cases are investigated and brought to justice, and police reform is realized. Colombia should provide the Department of State with a plan, after the government consults with Afro-Colombian and indigenous authorities and representatives, on how to address racism within the security forces and police.

We appreciate your efforts and look forward to your prompt reply to this letter.

Sincerely,



Representative Henry C. "Hank" Johnson Jr.

/s/

Rashida Tlaib
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Val Butler Demings
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Maxine Waters
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Dina Titus
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Jesús G. "Chuy" García
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Ilhan Omar
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

/s/

Raúl M. Grijalva
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Earl Blumenauer
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Steve Cohen
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Danny K. Davis
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Ayanna Pressley
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

André Carson
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/

Pramila Jayapal
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

/s/
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
MEMBER OF CONGRESS