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From The Minister of State

Dear Dr Lucas

Thank you for your letter of 28 April about Colombia.

The Desk Officer for Colombia has written to Peace Brigades International about the human rights situation in Colombia, the recent threats against them, and to assure them of our continuing support. I enclose a copy of the letter.

On 24 April, I issued a statement on the safety of human rights workers and trade unionists throughout Colombia: I also enclose a copy.

 KIM HOWELLS

(Agreed by the Minister and signed in his absence by the Private Secretary)

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25 April 2008

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Thank you for your letter of 7 April.

As you know, the Government remains deeply concerned about the level of threats and human rights abuses occurring throughout Colombia. As I explained to PBI and ABColombia colleagues when I met them on 22 April, the FCO and our Embassy in Bogotá have urged the Colombian government to be clear on the role of civil society and human rights defenders, and to give firm assurances that such organisations and individuals have the political space to conduct their work safely. You should be aware that FCO Minister Dr Kim Howells issued a very clear statement on the importance of enduring safety for human rights defenders and trade unionists on 24 April, a copy of which I attach.

I will address the points you have made in your letter in turn:-

- *That the UK government maintains contact with human rights defenders in Colombia, by receiving them and visiting their places of work as is stipulated in the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.*

The British Embassy in Bogotá maintains regular contact with trade unionists, human rights defenders and civil society activists, including those who are under threat. Recently, colleagues from the embassy visited the offices of a banking trade union, one of whose members had been murdered and another had received death threats. We will continue to offer this support.

- *That all dialogues between the EU and regional organisations should include a section on the situation of human rights defenders. Therefore, we appeal to the European Union*

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to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the EU-LAC Summit to open direct dialogue with the Colombian government about the alarming situation of human rights defenders in the country.

There is a strong argument for a discussion on Colombian human rights at a forthcoming session of the Committee on Latin America (COLAT), and we will explore this in Brussels. The EU-LAC Summit will focus on the specific areas of poverty reduction and environment including climate change and energy. However, with EU partners we are working for the inclusion of robust language about respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law throughout Latin America.

- *That the UK government expresses its support for the protection work carried out by Peace Brigades International and other international human rights organisations in Colombia.*

We continue to express support for the important work carried out by Peace Brigades and other such organisations in Colombia. We remain committed to supporting them and promoting their safety and security as they go about their work. We have discussed details of the new Human Rights and Democracy Strategic Programme Fund with all members of ABColombia including PBI, and I hope that specific areas of assistance for the advancement of civil society organisations in Colombia can be fully explored.

- *That the UK government appeals to the Colombian government to guarantee the safety of those organisations working in defence of human rights and other social organisations in Colombia to enable them to go about their work.*

We continue to urge the Colombian government to interact to a greater degree with civil society, and to adopt a more systematic approach, even with those groups that have differing views. The G24 process was launched largely at UK instigation, and we will continue to play an important role in its ongoing work.

- *That the UK government requests assurance from the Colombian government that high officials of the state will refrain from questioning the legitimacy of organisations that are legally constituted, and not to issue statements that cast doubt on the nature of their work. Also to insist that they take action to make amends for the accusations already made.*

Recent comments by Colombian officials are of concern. We have called on the Colombian government to make clear its position on the work of human rights defenders, trade unionists and others, as pointed out in Dr Howells' statement of 24 April.

- *That the UK government demands assurances from the Colombian government that it will carry out full, transparent and impartial investigations to clarify the events that have taken place and publish the results of these investigations.*

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We regularly make representations to the Colombian government regarding the cases of those who have been subjected to abuse, threat or murder, and we demand an answer in each case. Recently our Ambassador to Colombia handed to the Vice President's office a list of victims of human rights abuses and requested them to investigate. We await the outcome of their investigations.

- *That the UK government lobby the Colombian government to take effective measures to dismantle the illegal armed groups that emerged after the demobilisation of the paramilitary groups.*

The re-emergence of new paramilitary groups is of increasing concern. The Government agrees that the implementation of the Justice and Peace Law is far from complete. Along with EU partners we have called for the process to be rigorously implemented with priority given to victims' rights to truth, justice and reparation.

Colombia is central to the fight against drug-trafficking to the UK. Its human rights record remains one of great concern. The work of civil society organisations like Peace Brigades International is crucial to promoting respect for human rights and essential for peace, stability and security to flourish in Colombia. I hope we can continue to work closely with you and ABColombia colleagues to help achieve this.

[Signed]

Tony Kay

Dr Howells on deaths of Colombian Trade Unionists (24/04/2008)

Dr Kim Howells, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, today commented on reports of a number of deaths among Colombian Trade Unionists.

"I was very concerned to see the statement of the Colombian Trade Union Federation reporting that 22 trade unionists have been killed in Colombia so far in 2008. The situation for trade unionists, human rights defenders and indeed other Colombians continues to be very serious. I call on the Colombian Government to do its utmost to ensure that the brave people of Colombia striving for the protection of human rights are allowed to do their vital work safely and without fear. The perpetrators of threats, violence and murder must be pursued and held accountable for their actions, whoever they are."