



Press Release

WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

Promoting Human Rights, Democracy, and Social and Economic Justice in Latin America

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WOLA Urges International Community to Seek to Reduce Tensions Between Venezuela and Colombia

The Washington Office on Latin America laments the outcome of yesterday's OAS session, during which Colombia's government charged that Colombian guerrilla groups were present in Venezuelan territory. It is unfortunate that the OAS, which seeks to reduce regional tensions through multilateral diplomacy, became the setting for a tense exchange that led to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez ordering a full cutoff in diplomatic relations with Colombia.

While Colombia's concerns may be legitimate, the manner in which they were presented at the OAS session triggered a hostile Venezuelan response. The Andes today face a dangerous crisis.

Further moves on the part of either country to deepen this crisis will not benefit either nation. A crisis of this nature only results in decreased economic output for both countries' whose economies are interlinked. Many Colombian civilians' lives are already devastated due to Colombia's decades' long internal armed conflict and Venezuelans living in border towns already face insecurity. Fomenting more political tension, that will especially impact neighboring communities along the border, is irresponsible. It does little to address the real problems, particularly the need for Colombia and all of its neighbors to work jointly to dismantle illegal armed groups and narco-traffickers that operate within Colombia and along all its borders. Both countries need to refocus efforts into tackling criminal networks, drug-trafficking and addressing the critical needs of Colombian refugees.

WOLA holds out hope that the two countries will reconcile after the August 7 inauguration of President-Elect Juan Manuel Santos. This reconciliation should include a high-level, constructive dialogue, leading to concrete steps to improve security cooperation in the two countries' poorly governed border region. This should include a commitment on the part of both countries to protect their citizens and clear the area of all groups, be they the guerrillas, paramilitaries, or narco-trafficking organizations that operate with great freedom on both sides of the border. The countries should also come together to improve protection and assistance for Colombian refugees residing in Venezuela.

WOLA echoes the State Department's call yesterday for "greater interaction, cooperation, dialogue between Colombia and Venezuela to reduce those tensions and increase mutual cooperation." While the U.S. has long been a close ally of the Colombian government, we believe that it is most in the interest of the United States — indeed, of all parties involved — to reduce tensions and resolve this crisis through even-handed diplomacy and communication. Our

policy over the next several weeks must place the greatest priority on a peaceful resolution of this crisis, and must take great care not to fan the flames.

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