

## **Urgent Action**

The Asociación Sembrando Semillas de Paz (Sembrandopaz) emits URGENT ACTION for the physical and judicial security, and the right to a good name and due process for **Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas**, director of this organization, as well as other leaders of the community process of the High Mountain Zone of El Carmen de Bolívar, Colombia.

### **Recommended Actions**

- Maintain Ricardo Esquivia, the members of the Sembrandopaz team, and the leaders of the High Mountain Zone of El Carmen de Bolívar in prayer.
- Spread broadly this Urgent Action.
- Solicit the Colombian State (see names, contact information and sample letter below) to speak out on this issue and take all the necessary measures to assure the respect of life, physical integrity, right to due process, and good name of Ricardo Esquivia, the members of the Sembrandopaz team, and the community leaders of the High Mountain Zone of El Carmen de Bolívar.
- Solicit the Colombian State to speak out on this issue and support the citizen participation and full implementation of the Victims and Land Restitutions Law, and to reject all actions that go against this process.
- To the international community, communicate with their governmental representatives and to the Colombian Embassy in their country to express their concern and solicit their backing to this urgent action.
- Ask the Colombian State to guarantee the rights of a due process and the physical integrity of Jorge Montes in his place of reclusion, so that he is not subjected to torture or mistreatment.

### **Acts and Antecedents**

Trust-worthy sources have confirmed an imminent threat by Colombian authorities against the liberty of Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas and members of the coordinating committee of the Movement of the High Mountain Zone in El Carmen de Bolívar, and against the legitimacy of the Asociación Sembrando Semillas de Paz (Sembrandopaz).

Sembrandopaz was founded under the leadership of Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas in 2005 with the support and sponsorship of the Mennonite Church of Colombia with the goal of accompanying community processes of justice and peace building in the Montes de

María and Caribbean region of Colombia. Sembrandopaz is an active expression of the values of nonviolence, solidarity and love of neighbor with which the global Mennonite church has been committed to since its beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since his early formation in the Mennonite Church, Ricardo Esquivia has accompanied processes of peace building, human dignity and reconciliation, alongside churches and local communities in the region of Montes de María for approximately 40 years.

One year ago, Sembrandopaz began accompaniment to the movement of the High Mountain Zone of El Carmen de Bolívar, whose communities organized for their rights to integral, transformative reparations, a dignified return to their land, guarantees of no repetition, and state support for the solution to the death of avocado crops in more than 40 rural communities in the Montes de María region.

The community movement of the High Mountain Zone did a Peace March from April 5 to 8 of 2013 to demand a dialogue with local, state and national government, which began in San Jacinto on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April and continues to the present day. The movement has contributed to promote reconciliation between before-divided and fractioned communities of the High Mountain Zone, and to encourage citizen participation in dialogue.

On September 3 of the current year, leaflets appeared in the High Mountain Zone throughout the communities of Macayepo and Lazaro, threatening various leaders of the movement, including the Coordinator of the movement, Jorge Luis Montes Hernández. This document accuses the leaders of robbery, extortion, and affiliation with the FARC-EP and is signed by a self-defense paramilitary group, “Los Urabeños” and BACRIM.

On September 9, the Prosecutor of El Carmen de Bolívar called the community leader, Jorge Montes, to present himself in their office and there proceeded to follow through on an order to arrest him. In the pre-trial hearing, on September 11, they accused Mr. Jorge Montes of the crimes of belonging to the 35<sup>th</sup> Front of the FARC-EP, criminal conspiracy, homicide, forced displacement, extortion, and others.

According to trust-worthy sources, the threats against Ricardo are similar to actions and processes begun against him by Colombian authorities in 1989, 1993, and 2004, based

on false accusations, which were later suspended due to lack of foundation.

Towards the end of the month of June of the current year, after the accompaniment of Sembrandopaz in the Peace March of the High Mountain Zone, two international members of the Sembrandopaz team, with temporary religious visas under the support of the Mennonite Church of Colombia, Anna Vogt of Canada and Lariza Zehr of the United States, were called to the office of External Relations in Colombia to verify the validity of their migratory status, with the possibility of their deportation. This process has still not resolved.

Sign onto the Petition to Stop Political Persecution of Ricardo Esquivia and Colombian Human Rights Workers using this link:

<http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/stop-political-persecution>

CONTACT THESE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY (Sample letter below)

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\*Sample Letter to send to representatives of the Colombian Government and International Community:

Dear [OFFICIAL],

I am writing to express my deep concern for the physical safety and right to due process of Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas. According to credible sources, he faces threats and accusations intended to lead to his imprisonment or affect his physical safety. This is similar to events that took place in 1989, 1993 and 2004 in which Colombian authorities actions against Ricardo based on false accusations, which were later dismissed as unfounded.

Ricardo Esquivia is the Director of Asociación Sembrando Semillas de Paz (Sembrandopaz) a church-based organization located on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia and which has received support from the United States Institute for Peace and Mennonite Central Committee, among others. Sembrandopaz accompanies and supports communities affected by the armed conflict to peacefully reconcile differences and build a better future.

The threat comes in the context of Sembrandopaz's recent work supporting citizen initiatives of small farmers in the Montes de María region for the right to reparation, the return to their lands in safety and State assistance in addressing the agricultural crisis caused by the death of avocado plantations in more than 40 rural communities. In addition to the threats against Ricardo Esquivia, leaders of this citizen movement have also been threatened, and in one case already detained.

Ricardo Esquivia has promoted peace and community development in the region for over 40 years, as evidenced by international peace awards from the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He is co-founder and former Director of the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace of the Evangelical Council of Churches of Colombia (CEDECOL). He is also the founder and former Director of the Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action of the Mennonite Church of Colombia. For many years he represented all non-Catholic religious groups on the National Peace Council, which advises the President of Colombia.

[NOTE: If writing to Colombian government officials, continue as follows:]

I respectfully call on you to make a public pronouncement in support of the safety, due process, and rights of Ricardo Equivia and of the leaders of the communities in Montes de María, specifically El Carmen de Bolívar, demand an investigation of the threats and unfounded arrest of Jorge Montes, and take all steps within your power and authority to stop the harassment of grass-roots, peace building processes, guaranteed by citizens rights in the constitution of Colombia and international human rights law.

I also request that you inform me of the steps that are taken.

[Note: If writing to government representatives from other countries, continue as follows:]

I respectfully request that you address the Colombian officials on the attached urgent action and call on them to make a public pronouncement in support of the safety, due process, and rights of Ricardo Esquivia and of the leaders of the communities in Montes de María, specifically El Carmen de Bolívar, demand an investigation of the threats and unfounded arrest of Jorge Montes, and take all steps within your power and authority to stop the harassment of grass-roots, peace building processes, guaranteed by citizens

rights in the constitution of Colombia and international human rights law.

I also request that you inform me of the steps that are taken.

Thank you for your attention.

Yours sincerely,

[YOUR NAME and contact information]

[Attach Urgent Action text]