January 21, 2005
The Honorable Alvaro Uribe Velez
President of the Republic of Colombia
Palacio de Narino
Carrera 8 #7-26
Bogota
COLOMBIA

Dear President Uribe:

On behalf of the 12,000 members of the American Anthropological Association, I write to express our continuing concern for the welfare of the academic community in Colombia. As the world’s largest network of professional anthropologists, we are compelled by the September 17, 2004 assassination of one of our own – renowned sociologist Alfredo Correa de Andreis – to speak out on what we see as a threat to academic freedom and to the safety of Colombian scholars. We believe that the assault on civil liberties underway in your country – perpetrated by a range of armed actors in the current conflict, including Colombian military and security forces – seriously endangers the public good and undercuts your stated commitment to democratic principles.

As professional anthropologists, we dedicate our lives to understanding the context and meaning of human behavior in societies across the world. We do so in part to affirm the dignity of human life and celebrate the diversity of human expression, and in part to make comprehensible that which seems incomprehensible. In this vein, we recognize the challenging security environment your administration is addressing through its “Democratic Security” initiative, and we appreciate Colombia’s duty to arrest and prosecute individuals accused of crimes in your country’s devastating war. At the same time, we suspect that the death of Mr. Correa – and others in the academic community – underscores a glaring weakness in the approach your government is taking. Accounts from Colombian and international human rights groups, the United Nations, the United States State Department, and the Colombia Public Defender document a persistent pattern of questionable detentions of individuals alleged to be affiliated with armed groups, erroneous public branding of these individuals as suspects, and their subsequent release and ‘targeting’ by guerrillas or paramilitary units. Under these circumstances, human rights AND the public trust are at risk.

We highlight here a sampling of the reportage that has alarmed our Association and indicated that the assassination of Mr. Correa was neither aberration nor coincidence: 1) of the 184 trade unionists killed in Colombia in 2002, 83 were teachers; 2) 11 university student leaders were assassinated in 2003 and 50 more were forcibly displaced for their own security; 3) 4,800 civilians were arrested on charges of ‘rebellion’ during 2003, and 75% of them were released for lack of evidence; 4) killings attributed to state security forces are up from 120 per year between 1998 – 2002 to 184 in 2003 alone; and 5) a key element of the Democratic Security initiative is the deployment of a vast network of paid and unpaid ‘informants’ to assist in the identification of alleged subversives. As is now well-known, the case against Mr. Correa was tenuous – dubious informants brought fabricated charges against a prominent intellectual and activist. A recent account from the New Colombia News Agency labeled Colombia as “with the possible exception of Iraq, the most dangerous country on earth for independent journalists, trade unionists, teachers, [and] human rights activists. . .” Surely, this should trouble you at some level.

Mr. President, before you ascended to high office, you were once part of the scholarly communities at Harvard and Oxford. With your academic pedigree, surely you know what a hallowed and honorable
place the university environment is. It is, above all else, a safe place where scholars can feel free to
express diverse opinions, pursue innovative thinking/research, and advance the public good. Academia
is, in many ways, the engine that drives a pluralistic, democratic society. This environment simply must
be preserved, at all costs. Every time a student, a schoolteacher, student leader, or a university
professor is lost to an act of violence in Colombia, public trust in the educational system is compromised
and confidence in the future is diminished. This is an enormous price to pay in the name of a security
policy that has yet to make the citizens of Colombia feel any more secure.
It is our understanding that U.S. funding for Plan Colombia will come before Congress for re-
authorization sometime this year. We are aware that over 80% of over $2.5 billion in Plan Colombia
appropriations from 2000-2003 have, to this point, been spent on military/security affairs, an
extraordinary figure given that the percentage of Colombians living in poverty has risen to 64% during
this period. As Congress assesses the overall impact of Plan Colombia in its deliberations over whether
to re-authorize, it is likely that many concerned constituencies – including ours – will push hard for
adjustments to any forthcoming assistance under the Plan Colombia rubric. These might include: 1)
more balance between the military/security and socioeconomic portions of the aid package; 2)
conditions on the military/security assistance mandating improvement in Colombia’s human rights
performance; and 3) provision of evidence that collusion between Colombian armed forces and
paramilitary forces has ended. As anthropologists, we have an interest in ensuring the well-
being of the academic community in Colombia. As taxpayers, we have an interest in ensuring that our foreign
assistance money is judiciously invested.

In closing, we note that the case of Alfredo Correa de Andreis remains unsolved. Nobody has been
charged with this violent crime, and no suspects are in custody at this writing. We lament the loss of Mr.
Correa, a beacon of hope for those in Colombia seeking to make their world a better place. We
encourage you to do all in your power to safeguard the rights of your citizens while seeking an end to
the armed conflict. This is indeed a tall order, but one that is necessary to restore Colombia’s good
name.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Brumfiel, Ph.D.
President

Cc: Hon. Senator Richard Lugar, Chair
    Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
    Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 450
    Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Representative Henry Hyde, Chair
    House International Relations Committee
    Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2170
    Washington, DC 20510