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San Miguel de Mocoa, Putumayo, Colombia, March 16, 2021

**ADP 094**

Honorable Secretary of State

**ANTHONY BLINKEN**

Copied to:

Acting Assistant Secretary

**JULIE J. CHUNG**

U.S. Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

Deputy Assistant Secretary

**KEVIN O'REILLY**

U.S. Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

Open Letter from the State Assembly of Putumayo, Colombia

Honorable Secretary of State Anthony Blinken:

We write to you from the State Assembly of Putumayo, a democratically elected body representing the diverse set of social, economic and political interests in our department, at the south-western tip of Colombia along the borders with Peru and Ecuador. Putumayo has lived for decades at the frontlines of Colombia's civil war and our members include leaders from all parts of our territory, extending across political lines and speaking for a broad range of voices.

With great respect for your Offices and for the relationship between our two countries, our message today is one of concern for the future of peace, five years after the signing of a landmark agreement to end the region's longest running civil war. **As we write, Colombia is on the verge of restarting aerial fumigation of coca crops, following a six-year halt over public health concerns. Fumigation would undermine the peace accord's key tenants and spark a humanitarian crisis in our department.**

We therefore request the urgent support of the U.S. Congress with the following:

1. **End U.S. support and financing for forced eradication and aerial fumigation** with glyphosate. We believe the United States' invaluable support for Colombia can



best help consolidate peace by refocusing away from coercive drug policies and toward investments in providing basic economic opportunities, supporting rural development, expanding respect for human rights and creating sustainable access to legal markets. This approach is consistent with the approach that the U.S. administration has recently articulating, to refocus drug policy on harm reduction and public health, while prioritizing integral state presence and the respect for human rights in producer countries such as Colombia.

2. **Authorize a delegation from across the U.S. State Department, U.S. Congress and other branches of government to visit Putumayo** to see the risks of fumigation first hand. Aerial spraying risks impacting the promising alternative crops and livelihoods that offer small-hold farmers a sustainable path to transition away from producing coca. In the name of our communities, including small-hold growers, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, we reiterate that Putumayo requires an integral state presence in order to build peace and address historical debts to a traumatized population. Distinct from the current situation, in which the state is primarily visible only through military operations and eradication, Putumayo requires a dramatic expansion in social services, education, and market access.

In Putumayo, the threat of aerial fumigation carries the weight of our historical trauma. For nineteen years between 1996 to 2015, our department bore the brunt of operations intended to eliminate some 282,075 hectares of coca. We witnessed the damage caused by glyphosate spraying firsthand. The United States provided a significant portion of the resources that funded these operations, pouring agricultural toxins on the Amazon rainforest – a unique ecosystem that is fundamental to the global climate and is the source of every drop of water on the South American continent.

During these two decades, Putumayo documented the devastating impact of fumigation on the subsistence crops and legal agricultural livelihoods of countless communities, among them small-hold farmers, indigenous and Afro-Colombians. Spraying caused long-term damage to parts of the Amazon jungle, poisoning the soil, contaminating rivers, sickening livestock, amphibians and fish, and dealing a blow to biodiversity in the region. Residents in fumigated areas have experienced a wide range of alarming health concerns, ranging from skin conditions, eye damage, spontaneous abortions and complications in prenatal development.

Putumayo is culturally diverse, with 20 per cent of our population belonging to ethnic indigenous and/or Afro Colombian-communities. The widespread use of aerial glyphosate inflicted irreparable cultural harm on these communities, inasmuch as glyphosate's toxicity



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damaged mountains, trees and rivers that are sacred to an ancestral balance in the environment. Spraying also represents a violation of these communities' constitutionally-recognized rights to autonomy and to prior consultation.

Aerial fumigation exacerbated already-high levels of victimization among the rural population. By 2015, 242,065 of Putumayo's 363,967 residents had experienced forced displacement from their homes, primarily fleeing areas affected by aerial spraying. During this same period, 1,790 small-hold farmers were forced to abandon their land entirely, due either to environmental damage or armed coercion, according to the National Information Network from Colombia's National Victims Unit.

Indeed, this period saw a dramatic increase in social conflict, through the consolidation of paramilitary groups that exerted fierce criminal control over Putumayo – the most violent moments our department experienced during five decades of civil conflict. Popular opposition to paramilitary control provided ample ammunition for the guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), to recruit children and minors. Many of these same children had previously worked harvesting coca crops; after these crops were sprayed, they and their families lost their only source of income. Out of necessity and desperation, children were vulnerable to being pulled into armed groups. Putumayo documented at least 262 cases of forced child recruitment during the period in which aerial fumigation was employed, according to the Observatory of Memory and Conflict.

U.S.-supported fumigation even undermined some of the United States' own priorities in Putumayo. Alternative crops, promoted and supported through USAID, were fumigated – a visceral demonstration of the lack of policy coherence and the predominant focus on counter-narcotics interventions, without regard to their cost. The culmination of this historical experience contributed to an environment of frustration, exasperation, and helplessness among small-hold farmers, indigenous communities and Afro-Colombian communities in Putumayo.

The 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian state and the FARC, as well as its subsequent inclusion into our national Constitution, established a clear before and after with regard to the problem of illicit crops and their use in narcotics including cocaine. The peace accord recognized that the persistence of coca in Colombia can be attributed primarily to the conditions of poverty and marginalization in which small-hold farmers live, as well as to the weak institutional state presence in rural areas. These are factors that armed criminal networks have historically taken advantage of at poor farmers' expense. A true solution to the problem is therefore based in integral rural reform and the construction of true peace in long-abandoned territories. Concretely, Point Four of the 2016 agreement



stipulated three interventions. First, reforms to change the economic reality in areas with illicit crops and to create alternative livelihoods. Second, a policy shift toward seeing drug consumption as a problem of public health. And finally, efforts to target the drug trafficking networks that – in stark contrast to poor cultivators – earn significant profits from the narcotics trade.

**The Colombian government's intention to restart areal fumigation with glyphosate runs counter to the voluntary substitution pacts signed between local communities and the Colombian state.** According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, cultivators in Putumayo overwhelmingly supported voluntary substitution away from coca, with 23,523 families agreeing to voluntarily eradicate 9,542 hectares of coca in exchange for support transitioning to legal livelihoods – the largest number of families from any department in Colombia. This negotiated, non-violent approach is the only sustainable path toward the true construction of peace in Putumayo.

In this context, we write as deputies of the State Assembly of Putumayo to extend an invitation to a delegation of the U.S. government and the U.S. Congress to visit our region. In the name of our diverse communities, we invite you to see firsthand what Putumayo needs in order to truly establish an integral state presence that will support the construction of peace and address historical debts to the population. We must instead invest in the provision of services, the construction of roads, the extension of services including education and healthcare, as well as access to legal markets.

Placing our hope in your hands, we respectfully ask the U.S. Congress and the government of the United States to end its financial support for forced eradication including aerial fumigation with glyphosate. Instead, we hope that your invaluable support as a strong ally of Colombia's stability can be redirected toward the construction of peace.

Thank you for your attention and we look forward to your response in the email: putumayoasamblea17@gmail.com.

Sincerely, Representatives to the State Assembly of Putumayo

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