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Gustavo Petro Urrego
Presidente de la República
Carrera 8 No. 7-26
Bogotá
Colombia

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Dear Mr. President

**I am writing to express my deep concern about the serious risks to the life, safety, and security of the civilian population in the Catatumbo region of Colombia, particularly human rights defenders and members of local civil society organisations**. These individuals and their organisations are especially affected by your statements during the public national cabinet meeting on March 3, in which you claimed that civil society organizations in Catatumbo are «permeated» and «subordinated» to armed groups in the region.

Such words put members of civil society organisations, including human rights defenders, at grave risk in a region that has endured decades of armed conflict, where accusations of collaborating with one faction or another have costed many lives. Your declarations contradict international and national legislation recommending public officials to refrain from making statements stigmatising human rights defenders, which contributes to further endanger them and affects their valuable work. Your statements also contradict your own Presidential Directive 07 of 2023, instructing the entire Colombian government to support and recognise the work of human rights defenders.

For years, human rights defenders and civil society organisations have faced violence and hostility in Colombia, including in the Catatumbo, a region marked by extreme poverty, high levels of militarisation and armed violence, the negative impacts of forced coca eradication, the absence of support for economic alternatives, and the lack of access to essential services such as healthcare, food, education, water, and housing. State policies have failed to guarantee the population’s economic and social rights.

In recent years, and especially since the outbreak of the current violent crisis in mid-January, local civil society organisations of Catatumbo, including CISCA, ASCAMCAT, the MPC, and ASUNCAT, have consistently called for peace, respect for international humanitarian law, and structural solutions based on a stronger presence of civilian State institutions, as outlined in the recently signed Social Pact for the Territorial Transformation of Catatumbo.

**I urge you to retract on your statements and refrain from further stigmatising civil society organisations of Catatumbo. Instead, I ask that you to recognise their work and ensure their active participation in implementing measures to overcome the region’s crisis by strengthening the civilian presence of the State, providing long-overdue public services to the people of Catatumbo, and ultimately protecting their human rights.**

Yours sincerely,

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**Copie**

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