

JANUARY 14, 2002

**SCHAKOWSKY AND KEY CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS CALL ON COLOMBIAN PRESIDENT PASTRANATO PROTECT THE CIVILIAN POPULATION IN THE ZONA DE DESPEJE**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and key Congressional leaders today called on Colombian President Andres Pastrana to ensure the safety of civilians living in the zona de despeje. Schakowsky is a longtime supporter of a peaceful solution to the civil war that has resulted in the death of tens of thousands of innocent Colombians and an outspoken critic of wasteful U.S. anti-drug policy in the region.

Below is the bipartisan letter to President Pastrana organized by Schakowsky and signed by U.S. Representatives James P. McGovern (D-MA), Barbara Lee (D-CA), John Conyers (D-MI), William Delahunt (D-MA), Elijah Cummings (D-MD), Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), Lane Evans (D-IL), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Cynthia McKinney (D-GA), Sam Farr (D-CA), James Leach (R-IA), and Robert Wexler (D-FL).

*January 14, 2002* *Presidente Andrés Pastrana Arango*  
*República de Colombia*

*Dear President Pastrana:*

*We urge you to take immediate steps to protect the civilian population in the zona de despeje if there is no quick resumption of talks with the FARC-EP.*

*We strongly recommend that a reliable, vetted unit of the Armed Forces be specifically assigned, as its primary responsibility, the duty of protecting residents of the former zone. Given the situation in the area, we believe that simple assurances of protection of civilians will be insufficient. In addition, such a move would give the Armed Forces the opportunity to clearly demonstrate its commitment to protecting Colombian citizens from attacks by illegal armed groups.*

*Approximately 90,000 Colombians live in the area, which covers five municipalities in the departments of Meta and Caquetá. The decision to remain in the Zone throughout these three years was often a difficult one. Some families were at risk of attack, either from the FARC-EP or from the paramilitaries who have long criticized the peace process. Human rights groups have reported that some Colombians living in the Zone were killed by the FARC-EP and others were threatened. Residents have also reported that they fear that paramilitaries allied with the army would attack them as guerrilla sympathizers if peace talks were suspended.*

*With the rupture in negotiations, the residents of the Zone now risk being identified as*

*pro-guerrilla simply because they remained living in their homes, working their farms, and running their businesses. Their decision to remain there and contribute to peace in Colombia should not now be used against them. Your commitment to peace is something that we have admired. While we are dismayed at this bleak turn of events, we remain convinced that negotiation, not war, is the only viable solution to Colombia's problems. We understand the difficulties you have faced in your efforts, we hope that your Administration will act to prevent a broad military confrontation in the zone.*

*At this critical moment, we call on you to ensure that any operation by the security forces to retake the Zone include strict instructions to protect the civilian population. Thank you for your attention to our concerns. We look forward to your response.*