

JAMES P. McGOVERN
3RD DISTRICT, MASSACHUSETTS

COMMITTEE ON RULES

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

SENIOR DEMOCRATIC WHIP

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2103

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The Honorable Anibal Gaviria Correa
Mayor of Medellín
Oficina de la Alcaldía de Medellín
Palacio Municipal
Medellín, Colombia

Dear Mayor Gaviria,

I write to express my deep concern about the recent escalation in violence and threats against community and youth leaders in Comuna 13 and to condemn the October 30, 2012 killing of youth leader and hip-hop artist Elíder Varela, also known as "Duke." I respectfully ask that you use your good offices to provide and carry out urgently needed protective measures in close coordination with these same threatened community and youth leaders. Further, it is urgent that the perpetrators of Duke's murder and those of other recent killings of youth and community leaders be brought to justice so that the people of Comuna 13 may trust and rest assured that the State no longer tolerates impunity for these crimes.

You might be aware that I had the honor of visiting your city in August 2011 and to spend several days in Comunas 13, 8 and 5, meeting community leaders, religious and human rights organizations, leaders and members of youth and cultural organizations, and current and former gang members. I walked the streets of these districts and learned of their achievements, challenges, fears and aspirations. I found the experience deeply moving and inspiring, a model of community resilience, creativity and non-violent leadership. I am particularly grateful to the Catholic Church, the Instituto Popular de Capacitación (IPC), Fundación Mi Sangre, the YMCA/AJC, Son Bañ, the Elite Red de Hip Hop and Jaime Fajardo Landaeta, who was then with the Mayor's Office, for their insights and coordination. Among the many individuals I spent time with in Comuna 13 was "Duke." His murder and the increased level of threats targeting so many of the organizations, community leaders, artists and young people with whom I met are grave matters to me personally, and I am closely monitoring their situation and needs.

It is my understanding from media reports and conversations with Medellín NGOs that over 30 community leaders, youth and artists have temporarily left their homes in Comuna 13 because of targeted threats against them and their families. Not only do I denounce these threats, but I call on you and other Colombian authorities to work with these threatened individuals and organizations to coordinate and provide effective measures of protection so that they may return to their homes and their valuable work. It is my understanding that these local leaders have no intention of abandoning their work in Comuna 13 and it is incumbent upon the State to ensure

that they are protected, can continue their leadership, and remain able to speak and act freely. It is also my understanding that these local leaders do not support further militarization of Comuna 13, but rather recommend that coordinated efforts be made to de-escalate the level of violence, including the removal or cleansing of corrupt elements among the police and other State actors aligned with one or more of the illegal armed actors operating in the district.

I would also like to express my concern over the continuing escalation of violence in Comuna 8, where I had the privilege of meeting many young people at Casa de la Cultura who had rejected pressures to join gangs and take up arms. Over the past year, they have been increasingly threatened, along with their cultural initiatives and community leadership. It is urgent to collaborate with local community leaders in designing effective measures to protect them and safeguard neutral community spaces.

I understand that the violence and constant climate of threat are of long-standing in Comuna 13, as well as in Comunas 8 and 5. Resolving the broader issues confronting these neighborhoods requires a new level of responsiveness and protective measures, as requested by threatened local leaders and community organizations, and sustainable investments in health, education, recreational and cultural institutions located in these neighborhoods. Just as importantly, it requires urgently needed, long-term and increased investments, public and private, to create and establish neighborhood-based businesses that provide the residents of these neighborhoods opportunities for decent work at a decent wage and the ability to learn how to direct and manage legal enterprises. As you well know, Mr. Mayor, nothing stops a bullet better than respect and a decent job. Please know that I strongly endorse, encourage and support such initiatives and I volunteer to assist in any way that someone in my position from afar might be of help.

I hope that we might have an opportunity to meet in the future to discuss these matters in more depth. Until then, however, I look forward to hearing from you soon about these urgent requests and concerns.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

JPM:cmb

cc: President Juan Manuel Santos
Sergio Fajardo Falderrama, Governor of Antioquia
Andrés Villamizar, Director, National Protection Unit