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1998 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award Laureate
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award Ceremony
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I want to express my sincere appreciation to the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, to Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, Kerry Kennedy Cuomo and other members of the Kennedy family, for honoring four women and men this year for their efforts in defending human rights in Colombia. It is also an immense honor for me to receive this award in the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama because of what he represents for his own people and for all of humanity.

In receiving this award today, I am convinced we are honoring not only our individual efforts, but rather the efforts of hundreds of people in my country, many of them anonymous, who have worked for years in the defense and promotion of human rights, often in the midst of difficult conditions.

I want to thank you for taking a closer look at Colombia, a country in the throes of a serious, two decade-old, humanitarian crisis. This crisis has often gone unnoticed by the international community, despite its horrifying statistics of extrajudicial executions, massacres, forced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detention, all documented by a variety of international institutions.

Colombia is known and respected as a country of democratic traditions. Indeed, its governments are elected by direct popular vote, and the 1991 Political Constitution enshrines human rights as a cornerstone of the Democratic State. However, the type of democracy sanctioned in my country has excluded both the emergence of political opposition as well as the free exercise of basic rights and freedoms by poor and middle-class sectors. Nearly 3,000 leaders and members of the Patriotic Union Party, and more than 2,000 members of the Unified Worker's Central, have been killed since 1985. Just two weeks ago, in the midst of a state worker's strike, Jorge Ortega, Vice-President of this union was assassinated.

The human rights crisis in Colombia is taking place within the context of an armed conflict that pits the country's Armed Forces against the guerrillas. In this conflict, the army has adopted a strategy that makes no distinction between armed subversion and legitimate social opposition and protest. This strategy also includes the use of illegal means of persecution, through undercover actions by state agents and the use of paramilitary groups involved in indiscriminate criminal acts.

In the same way, the guerrilla actions have not just been directed against regular armed forces; frequently, the civilian population has been affected. Thus, the civilian population has become the primary victim of the armed conflict, which has deteriorated to an absolutely intolerable level.

Human rights organizations and a variety of social groups in the country have insisted on the urgent need to find a political solution to Colombia's armed conflict. The recent declarations and steps taken by the government of President Pastrana to initiate conversations with the guerrillas give us hope.

At the same time, we are also very worried. Negotiating in the midst of the conflict may intensify levels of confrontation and exacerbate criminal actions against the civilian population. The lack of political will shown by successive governments to put an end to the links between the Armed Forces and paramilitary groups fuels doubts concerning this government's decision to search for stable and lasting peace.

We are convinced that respect for human rights is a condition for achieving peace, and safeguarding such rights are even more urgent in circumstances of conflict. Peace and national reconciliation are goals that must be linked with the search for truth, justice and reparation for victims, as well as with an end to conditions of misery in which nearly half the Colombian population is immersed. Only under these conditions can the peace process engender a democratic future.

Finally, I would urge representatives of the United States and other governments who have expressed interest in the Colombian peace process to act simultaneously on two fronts. At the same time that they encourage a favorable climate for initiating and carrying out peace talks, they should actively engage in observing, monitoring and overseeing the human rights situation and the behavior of the actors in the conflict. Perhaps this will contribute to a decrease in the suffering of

many Colombians at the same time that it opens the possibility of reaching a peace accord.

To everyone who accompanies us here today, many thanks.