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

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. In particular human rights defenders and members of local civil society organisations. These individuals and their organisations are especially affected by the statements you made during the public national cabinet meeting on March 3. **You claimed that civil society organizations in Catatumbo are “permeated” and “subordinated” to armed groups in the region.**

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. Your words put members of civil society organisations, including human rights defenders, at grave risk. Catatumbo is a region that has endured decades of armed conflict, where accusations of collaborating with one faction or another have costed many lives.

In recent years local civil society organisations of Catatumbo, including CISCA, ASCAMCAT, the MCP, and ASUNCAT, have consistently called for peace. They have also called for 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 and ultimately protecting their human rights.

Yours sincerely,