



Good Evening,

The Lawyers Collective “José Alvear Restrepo” (CCAJAR) wishes to extend its warmest greeting to everyone. First of all, we would like to express our gratitude to the Center for Justice and Accountability for honouring us with this important recognition, which many brave men and women - who have dedicated their lives to the construction of a world with more dignity, equality and justice - have received.

We are an organization that has worked in Colombia for over 38 years defending human rights and representing the victims of State crimes in their search for justice.

Our country is a paradoxical one. Lush beauty, countless natural resources and enviable laws, but a shameful human rights record. More than 6000 members of the opposition party Patriotic Union (Patriótica Unión) were assassinated in the largest political genocide in recent history. More than 7 million small scale farmers have been driven from their land, which ended up in the hands of large landowners and transnational companies. More than 3000 trade union members have been murdered for demanding their rights and defending our national sovereignty. Just in the last 5 years, more than 350 human rights defenders have been killed.

It is because of the work we do that we have been victims of this persecution. We have been stigmatized, surveilled, and threatened. For many years we were the target of an enormous illegal intelligence operation led by the State’s security agency (DAS), and this became a real psychological torture for many of our peers and their families. CCAJAR’s president at the time received a box with a dismembered bloody doll inside and a note that said “you have a very nice family, take care of it”. It was a horrific message directed at her young daughter, who was being followed.

In this scenario of persecution and death, the perpetrators have not been able to take away our dreams; they have not been able to steal our hope, our ability to continue fighting; or the courage to live joyfully and fully.

This resistance largely comes as a result of solidarity, which gives us courage and allows us to overcome despair. We receive such solidarity from the Center for Justice and Accountability, an organization whose commitment to human rights and justice in our beloved Latin American and our tormented Colombia we admire.

More than seven years ago we had the opportunity to meet our friend Almudena Bernabeu, at the same time that one of the lawyers from CCAJAR, had been forced into exile due to his work representing victims of serious human rights violations. Since then, we have benefited from CJA's support in difficult times, and we have also had the opportunity to give back to CJA some of that same affection by supporting their work in Colombia and Central America. For that we are extremely grateful.

More recently, CJA joined us in discussions related victim participation in the peace negotiations. We focused on making victims a central element of the negotiations and proposals designed to prevent impunity for the crimes committed throughout the conflict.

Being honoured with the "Judith Lee Stronach Human Rights Award" will protect us from attacks from those who want to destroy us as an organization and individuals. Honouring us contributes to fulfill the hope and dreams that we will not have to choose the path of exile, to continue to fight for a dignified life, peace and justice.

With this award, you are showing us that that our struggles have not been in vain, that we are not alone, that there is an invincible solidarity that rises from all corners around the world. We dedicate this award to all the human rights defenders in Colombia and Latin America who continue sow fraternity and compassion with the certainty of harvesting peace and justice.

Today Colombia is on the verge of ending an armed conflict that has lasted over half a century, and with this the hope that our land will not continue to bleed. It is a very important step for Colombia, and dream we have had for generations.

However, we fear we still may go down a dark path as it happened in other countries in Latin America that have experienced similar processes. As we get closer to final peace agreement, the grip of threats and attacks gets tighter and tighter. This year alone, 28 human rights defenders have been killed. This is why we ask all of you to continue supporting us and the people of Colombia.

The signing of the peace agreement will end the armed conflict, but it does not guarantee an end to the persecution, human rights violations, and state crimes.

We cry out for your active presence in the new challenges that will come. It is urgent that there is guarantees of non-repetition so that these pages of horror are not repeated, and instead, Colombia achieves a real democracy, one based on the protection of human rights, peace, and social justice.

Thank you very much.