The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

April 25, 2012

Dear President Obama,

As advocates who work to combat sex trafficking and protect the victims of trafficking networks, we are troubled by the conduct of the U.S. Secret Service agents and military personnel associated with the alleged exploitation of women in Cartagena ahead of your visit to attend the Sixth Summit of the Americas. We write to express our concerns about the consequences that persons in Colombia who are victims of sex trafficking or sexual exploitation are likely to suffer as a result of such conduct and the importance of how this is being framed in the public debate.

As the U.S. government highlighted in its 2011 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, issued pursuant to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, "Colombia is a major source country for women and girls subjected to sex trafficking in Latin America, the Caribbean, Western Europe, Asia, and North America, including the United States." The report also notes that internal sex trafficking and sex tourism remain significant problems, particularly as many women and girls are "trafficked within Colombia end up in coastal cities, such as Cartagena and Barranquilla, which have become popular destinations for foreign sex tourists from the United States and Europe."

We appreciate the actions that the U.S. government has taken to stem sex trafficking around military bases and by military service members and contractors. Laudably, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), governing all uniformed force members, touts a zero tolerance policy for purchasing sex or engaging in sex trafficking. Federal laws further prohibit U.S. government contractors and defense contractors from engaging in any form of sex trafficking, and provide extraterritorial jurisdiction over U.S. nationals who commit child sex tourism offenses abroad. Notably, your statement dated March 15, 2012 during the meeting of the Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, reinforces your administration's commitment to combat this problem and protect human dignity.

Despite these important strides, recent events in Cartagena illustrate the persistence of a culture within the military and security sectors that allows for the commercial sexual exploitation

and sex trafficking of women and girls. Information emerging about the incident suggests that sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation might have taken place in Cartagena with the participation of the U.S. Secret Service agents and military personnel.

On April 17, 2012 Colombia's Caracol Radio station broadcasted a report about a travel agency in the United States that claims that U.S. Secret Service agents and military personnel had contacted them to explore the availability of sex tours to Cartagena.[1] Caracol Radio reported that the travel agent explained that he could arrange in advance for paid sexual services from women during trips to Cartagena. The travel agent emphasized that payments must be made upfront to the travel agency, rather than directly to the women in Cartagena. He added that the "deal" entitled the customer to receive sexual services from a different woman every day, and pick from a pool of 100 women.

It thus appears that Secret Service agents and military personnel were allegedly aware of and may have partaken in sex tourism and sex trafficking prohibited under U.S. federal law. It is unclear whether these government agents ever reported the travel agency's illicit conduct.

In addition, in her interview with The New York Times on April 18, 2012, one of the women involved in the incident mentioned she had to pay a fee to her pimp; "[e]ventually, she lowered her demand to $250, which she said was the amount she has to pay the man who helps find her customers."[2] Given that this woman must pay a man to help her find customers suggests the U.S. Secret Service agents and military personnel possibly purchased sexual services from women who may be victims of trafficking and/or commercial sexual exploitation.

This incident raises serious concerns about the potential illegality of the U.S. Secret Service agents and military personnel's conduct. The military personnel allegedly violated U.S. law under the UCMJ by purchasing commercial sex in Colombia (whether or not the providers were victims of sex trafficking, and whether or not prostitution was legal in areas of Cartagena). Both the secret service agents and military personnel purchased sex in a foreign city that the U.S. government itself has clearly identified as a haven for sex trafficking and may have further exploited women who have been subjected to sex trafficking and/or commercial sexual exploitation. If this was not a clear violation of U.S. law, it highlights the urgent need to implement a zero tolerance policy for *all* US government employees, including the Secret Service.

This conduct, moreover, has already had significant, far-reaching adverse effects in increasing demand for the sex trafficking industry in Colombia. According to Colombia's Caracol Radio's report, the publicity around the "sex scandal" has been a boon for sex tourism.

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[1] Caracol Radio, *Proxeneta en EEUU dice que agentes del Servicio Secreto le solicitaron servicios de prostitución en Cartagena*, April 17, 2012, at http://www.caracol.com.co/noticias/internacional/proxeneta-en-eeuu-dice-que-agentes-del-servicio-secreto-le-solicitaron-servicios-de-prostitucion-en-cartagena/20120417/nota/1671153.aspx (last accessed April 21, 2012).

[2] William Neuman & Michael S. Schmidt, *Woman Recounts Quarrel Leading to Agent Scandal*, New York Times, April 18, 2012, at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/world/americas/colombian-escort-speaks-about-secret-service-scandal.html?_r=2&smid=tw-nytimes&seid=auto (last accessed April 21, 2012).

They report that the travel agent claimed to have received more than 20 emails requesting trips to Cartagena the day after the news broke.

Spirit Airlines, a U.S. carrier operating flights throughout the U.S., Latin America and the Caribbean, also tried to capitalize on the scandal to perpetuate demeaning stereotypes of Latin women to sell cheap flights to Cartagena. It posted an advertisement on its website proclaiming "More Bang for your Buck" with "upfront payment…required" depicting a male secret service agent in front of four scantily clad women.

The TIP Report ranks countries partly on the government's "serious and sustained efforts to reduce the demand for (A) commercial sex acts; and (B) participation in international sex tourism by nationals of the country." TVPA, Sec. 108(B)(11). In light of the conduct of U.S. Secret Service and military service men in Colombia, the subsequent reported increase in demand by U.S. nationals to partake in sex tourism, as well as the potential existence of sex trafficking networks operating in Colombia, the TIP Office must re-assess the Tier 1 ranking for both the United States and Colombia.

While we recognize the steps undertaken thus far by U.S. government authorities to address the situation, greater emphasis must be placed on the potentially devastating impact on persons in Colombia who are victims of sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation. We further insist that the human rights of all the women involved in this incident are respected and upheld.

In addition to internal investigations launched, we urge the relevant U.S. government entities to consider the following recommendations for further action:

1. Investigate all the evidence that has come out as part of the coverage of this episode and prosecute those responsible for any crime committed in this context, including dismantling networks of sex trafficking, in collaboration with Colombian authorities.

2. Take additional action to prevent U.S. Secret Service agents and military personnel from engaging in conduct that supports the sex trafficking industry, employing all available legal and policy tools, including the TVPA, UCMJ, as applicable.

3. Implement a zero tolerance policy on sex trafficking and the purchase of sex for *all* U.S. government employees, including the Secret Service.

4. Ensure that travel agencies located or operating in the U.S. are not involved in conduct that constitutes sex trafficking under the TVPA, or violates the Mann Act, which criminalizes inducing travel for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation or other sex-related crimes.

5. Allocate additional resources to combating sex trafficking and sex tourism in Colombia, and ensure that persons who have been victims of trafficking receive comprehensive services in collaboration with Colombian authorities.

We thank you in advance for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Tzili Mor
New York Director
Equality Now (US/Int'l)

Angela Ospina
Director
Centro de Pensamiento sobre la Trata de Personas (Colombia)

Gabriela Salcedo Bolaños
Directora
Asociación Manos Amigas (Colombia)

Andrea Suárez
Centro Scalabrini de Migraciones (Colombia)

Maria Victoria Ramírez
Directora
Corporación Contigo Mujer (Colombia)

Silvia Cuervo
Directora
Fundación Manapaz (Colombia)

Dr. Mark P. Lagon
Professor in the Practice of International Affairs,
Georgetown University*
Former U.S. Ambassador-At-Large to Combat Trafficking in Persons
*affiliation for identification purposes only

Laurel Eisner
Executive Director
Sanctuary for Families (US)

Mónica Roa
Programs Director
Women's Link Colombia (Colombia/Int'l)

Nohemi Porras
Directora
ASODESCAR – Asociación de Desplazados de Cartagena (Colombia)

Taina Bien-Aimé
Trafficking Expert
Former Executive Director of Equality Now (2001–2011)

Norma Ramos
Executive Director
Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (US/Int'l)

Jairo Antonio Toro
Presidente
Fundación Jhonatan (Colombia)

Oscar Gómez
Director General
Fundación Esperanza (Colombia)

Nancy Edith Alarcón Moreno
Coordinadora
Red Tamar (Colombia)

Jimmy Lee
Executive Director
Restore (US)

Linda Smith (U.S. Congress 1995-99)
Founder and President
Shared Hope International (US/Int'l)

Jackeline Vargas Parra
Docente
Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramnaga (Colombia)

Edgar Arana
Jefe de Posgrado de Escuela de Derecho
Universidad Libre de Pereira (Colombia)

Cindy Dyer
Vice President, Human Rights
Vital Voices Global Partnership (US/Int'l)

cc: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton
Ambassador-at-Large Luis CdeBaca, Office to Combat and Monitor Trafficking in Persons
Ambassador-at-Large Melanne Verveer, Office for Global Women's Issues
Secretary Janet Napolitano, Department of Homeland Security
Secretary Leon Panetta, Department of Defense
The Honorable Eric Holder Jr., Attorney General