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Special sitting

High-level visit by His Excellency, Mr Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, President of the Republic of Colombia

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Friday, 1 June 2018, 11.40 a.m.

President: Mr Murad

**Statement by His Excellency,
Mr Juan Manuel Santos Calderón,
President of the Republic of Colombia**

The President

I call to order this special sitting of the International Labour Conference.

We are honoured to receive the visit of a most distinguished guest, Mr Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, President of the Republic of Colombia.

Your Excellency, on behalf of the Conference, please allow me to extend a very warm welcome to you and to express our gratitude to you for coming to address our assembly. If I am not mistaken, Colombia is among the founding Members that established this Organization almost a century ago. Furthermore, you, like this house, have had the tremendous honour of being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I therefore believe that it is most fitting that you should address our Conference today as I am certain that your words will help to guide our work.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr Ryder, to officially welcome President Santos Calderón.

The Secretary-General of the Conference
(Original Spanish)

Today is a very special day for the ILO: it is our great honour to receive the President of Colombia and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, His Excellency Mr Juan Manuel Santos Calderón.

Colombia is a founding Member of the ILO. We have had almost 100 years together or, I might say, “100 years of solidarity”.

Unfortunately, for half of this century of shared history, Colombia has been involved in a tragic conflict. This conflict brought with it tremendous suffering for the people of Colombia. For decades, when we mentioned Colombia in this house it was often in the context of violence and confrontation and, at times, we have had to deal with very serious complaints against your country.

It is for precisely this reason that having you here today is so important and so historic: it is a sign of a very different relationship between Colombia and the ILO.

As another Colombian Nobel prizewinner, Gabriel García Márquez, has said, “It is easier to start a war than to end it”.

Because of your determination to put an end to the conflict, the Nobel Committee, in awarding you the Peace Prize, pointed to your “resolute efforts to bring the country’s more than 50-year-long civil war to an end, a war that has cost the lives of at least 220,000 Colombians and displaced close to 6 million people”.

At the signing of this peace agreement, an event that I had the privilege of witnessing, you summed up the suffering of your people when you said, with considerable feeling, “People of Colombia, the horrible night is over!”

And now that this horrible night is over, all of us in this room wish for Colombia a day bright with peace and social justice.

Many challenges remain, and we at the ILO undertake to continue to work with Colombia to achieve a future marked by decent work for all and full respect for international labour standards, with particular attention paid to the countless victims of violence.

You are leaving your people a unique legacy, a legacy of peace and greater opportunities for future generations.

In conclusion, President, you have said that good friends do not need to visit each other every day, but we are extremely grateful to you for accepting our invitation in the midst of a busy official agenda and on the eve of a happy event. Therefore, on behalf of us all, I would like to wish you well as you boldly embark on a new endeavour in the coming days by becoming a first-time grandfather. Congratulations!

The President

It is my honour to invite His Excellency, Mr Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, President of the Republic of Colombia, to address the 107th Session of the International Labour Conference.

Mr Juan Manuel Santos Calderón President of the Republic of Colombia (Original Spanish)

“*Si vis pacem, cole iusticiam.*” If you want peace, work for justice. This is an incontrovertible truth and a principle that is enshrined in the document that lies beneath the cornerstone of this Organization, this building.

I stand before you today as the President of a country that is beginning to build peace and is taking the first steps on a difficult yet promising path towards development, prosperity and greater justice. I do so in the firm belief that, as stated in the Preamble to the Constitution of the International Labour Organization, “universal and lasting peace [– both universal peace and the peace of peoples –] can be established only if it is based upon social justice”. Peace is the highest aim of any society, the ultimate goal to which we can aspire and the necessary condition for freedom and progress towards equity and well-being. This is the objective that we have been pursuing: the collective building of a democratic society based on a decent life for all and supported by values such as equity, inclusion and the enjoyment of fundamental rights. Peace is far more than the silencing of guns; we have already achieved that. We have put an end to over half a century of armed conflict between children of the same nation. It was not an easy task.

We are now embarking on an even more difficult task: peace-building. Building peace is like building a cathedral; it is a long and complex process that takes time, placing one stone upon another, and we have scarcely begun. This is a process that has political, economic and social dimensions and that, as we have known from the beginning, will take at least 15 years.

Achieving social justice means more jobs and less poverty and inequality. Decent work is a pillar of this effort, to which labour policies and more equitable economic development are essential. Developing and promoting public policies designed to increase decent work in

Colombia and promoting the very important aim of social dialogue in order to genuinely and effectively ensure enjoyment of the people's labour rights have been key elements of my Government's work at this historic moment in my country's history.

Historians are well aware that the world of work has always been linked to peace-building. It is not a coincidence that the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War, also established the International Labour Organization. And in the closing days of the Second World War, the representatives of employers, workers and governments once again agreed that building and maintaining peace throughout the world would require the recognition of labour rights; in 1944, they enshrined this belief in the Declaration of Philadelphia.

Colombia has been a Member of the ILO since its establishment in 1919. As a State, we have undertaken to put the Organization's objectives and ideals into practice and we have made progress although, as we acknowledge, it has not always been sufficient. But now, thanks to peace, we are closing a chapter marked by violence and by signs that, as a country, we did not respect the rights of either workers or employers. We still have a long way to go; this is a long-term undertaking. But there have been significant achievements over the past few years and we have laid a foundation for further progress.

We have a more solid and robust economy with low inflation and the highest investment rate in the region. Unlike similar economies in Latin America, ours has continued to grow while surviving the worst external shock since the Great Depression of the 1930s. We have translated macroeconomic progress into improved social indicators.

The current Government – my Government – is beginning to take more accurate and complete measurements in order to better monitor the effort to combat poverty. These measurements are based not only on monetary income, but on the monitoring of a full set of basic needs that families must meet in order to overcome poverty. This is the Multidimensional Poverty Index, which was developed by my former professor and Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, under Oxford University's Human Development Initiative.

Colombia and Mexico were pioneers in the implementation of this methodology, which is now used by over 50 countries throughout the world. Its most useful feature is that it allows social investment to be far better targeted in order to combat poverty more effectively. Between 2010 and 2017, Colombia's multidimensional poverty rate fell to 17 per cent from 30.4 percentage points. This means that 5.5 million people emerged from poverty, an unprecedented number in our history. Using traditional measurements (income), the poverty rate fell from 40.3 to 26.9 per cent.

We now have a middle class that is larger than that of the people who are considered poor. And there has also been a reduction in extreme poverty; it fell by exactly half – from 14.4 to 7.4 per cent – last year. We are talking about roughly 2.8 million people who have emerged from extreme poverty.

We have been measuring multidimensional poverty in five dimensions: access to education, enjoyment of the rights of the child, access to health care, access to housing and, of course, access to work.

Because education has been a primary focus of my Government, we have doubled investment in the sector and, for the past four years, have been allocating more resources to it than to any other item in the national budget. We have decreed that education shall be free at all grade levels in the public schools. We are improving the quality of education and have implemented an ambitious plan to introduce common school hours for all Colombian children. We are also launching a very ambitious comprehensive care programme for

children from early childhood onward, because this is where inequality begins, and are also significantly increasing access to higher education.

We are making health care a fundamental right and are achieving universal coverage.

We have more than halved the housing deficit by building over 1.5 million homes and giving them to 280,000 families in the most vulnerable sectors at almost no cost.

In other words, with peace and protection of the people's fundamental rights as our roadmap, we have endeavoured to create what we have called a "rights-based government", a government based on inclusion and non-discrimination, environmental protection – because our country is rich in biodiversity but highly vulnerable to climate change – and the protection of victims' rights after more than 50 years of war.

We have sought to be a government that was capable of ensuring that all citizens, regardless of gender, race, belief or sexual orientation, enjoyed the same rights and are respected despite the country's great diversity. We have sought to be a government that engaged in dialogue with our indigenous communities and respected their ancestral rights, customs and traditions. On the day that I assumed office, almost eight years ago, in an act of respect for our indigenous communities, I myself went to request our elder brothers, the governors or *mamos* of the indigenous peoples, to allow me to do so.

We have made a great deal of progress in all of these areas, but I will be the first to admit that much remains to be done.

One achievement that is particularly important for me is our success in narrowing the gap between rich and poor, the so-called "Gini coefficient" – in other words, inequality – more than any other Latin American country. It is not the Government that makes this claim; it is the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), although there are a few points on which we and the Commission still have embarrassing differences of opinion.

Nevertheless, in recent years the income of the poorest 20 per cent of the population has grown five times faster than that of the richest 20 per cent.

A fundamental pillar of this entire effort has been employment, decent employment. Over the past eight years, 3.5 million jobs have been created, 70 per cent of them in the formal sector, and, as we promised eight years ago during my first presidential campaign, we have achieved a single-digit unemployment rate.

Within the framework of our National Development Plan, which is the law of the Republic, we have adopted a National Decent Work Policy that includes strategies for job creation and formalization and for the protection of public and private sector workers.

The ILO's support has been essential in helping us to achieve the good results that we can now share with you, the international community. In particular, both personally and on behalf of the Colombian people, I would like to thank Mr Ryder and his team for their invaluable support and ongoing advice in the effort to strengthen our labour policies in line with the high standards required, for example, for our accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an event that occurred in Paris two days ago.

My country has ratified 61 ILO Conventions, including those related to the core labour rights: freedom of association, the right to bargain collectively, non-discriminatory employment, the prohibition of forced labour and the effective abolition of child labour.

For decades, the ILO rightly called into question the labour situation in Colombia, particularly with regard to violence against trade unionists and failure to convict the perpetrators. At the end of the previous century, in 1998, a complaint was lodged against Colombia in connection with its application of the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), and the Collective Bargaining Convention, 1981 (No. 154). My country was on the point of having a commission of inquiry imposed on it although, fortunately, this did not occur. Since 2010, Colombia has only once (in 2014) been requested to submit to the Committee on the Application of Standards a report on its application of the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81), after having been requested to submit reports annually for over 20 years.

Thanks to our efforts as a State and to technical assistance from the ILO, the situation in my country is now different and we have a better tale to tell. And here again, I must pay tribute to our tripartite committee, in which we engage in a dialogue between the Government, trade unions and employers.

Two years ago, the Office of the Attorney-General established an elite group to launch and monitor criminal investigations into crimes against trade unionists. Recent years have seen a total of 34 convictions for the murder of trade unionists and some 350 convictions for crimes committed prior to this period. The other trials for offences committed between 2011 and 2017 are proceeding apace and 120 people are in custody in that connection. But as I always say, this is NOT enough. Just one death, one murder, is too much; just one crime undermines all of our efforts to write a new chapter in our history as a nation.

We are also making significant progress in protecting the right to freedom of assembly and of association. To date, 88 per cent of the cases involving violations of these rights have been closed. And we have supported all of this work with an institution-building effort; in 2011, we re-established the Ministry of Labour, which had ceased to exist, and this allowed us to double the number of inspectors and to establish a governmental employment service. We also made significant changes in our legislation as requested by the ILO by, for example, establishing that only the courts – not the Government – can declare that a strike is illegal.

We have also made a great effort to combat undue labour intermediation; since 2014, we have imposed fines amounting to nearly 96 million dollars.

Over the past eight years, 2,950 collective agreements have been deposited with the Ministry of Labour. In order to give you an idea of the magnitude of this number, we went from 184 such agreements in 2010 to 576 in 2017. In addition, three collective bargaining processes have been carried out in the public sector, benefiting more than 1.2 million public servants.

In Colombia, we are also continuing to establish trade union organizations; since 2010, 2,500 trade unions, 59 trade union federations and four trade union confederations have been established. Colombia currently has 10,900 such organizations.

Furthermore, we are firmly committed to eliminating child labour. The national child labour rate, which stood at 13 per cent in 2011, had fallen to 7.3 per cent by last year but the target – the goal – is to bring it to zero.

Our aim is to continue to make the right to decent work – good jobs – a reality for all Colombians. This is one of the main drivers of development and prosperity. However, unemployment in Colombia is still too high and a far greater effort is needed. In the meantime, enrolment in comprehensive occupational training has increased by almost 1 million since 2010 and enrolment in supplementary classroom training has risen from 3.3 million to nearly 5 million.

Decent, high-quality jobs are, of course, also formal-sector jobs and this has been reflected in the increased number of working members of the pension scheme; their numbers have risen by half, from 6.9 million in 2010 to 10.6 million in 2017. Let me repeat that all of this progress has been made possible by generous assistance from the ILO.

I consider it a great honour to be here; it is the first time that a Colombian President has addressed this plenary. The path that we have been taking in Colombia is part of the work that the international community is carrying out within the framework of this Organization – the ILO – in an effort to make workers’ jobs more decent and ensure the effective protection of their rights.

Ultimately, as I have said, this lasting peace that we are seeking, that we are building for the world, is only possible if we ensure that there is social justice. It is an immense challenge, towards which we must work in a global context that is, unfortunately, characterized by uncertainty.

Paradoxically, the extraordinary progress in terms of production and economic growth at the global level, which should allow us to make great strides in eliminating poverty and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable members of society, has instead generated unemployment and massive underemployment in various parts of the world. According to the ILO itself, 66 million young people around the world are unemployed and 145 million young workers are still living in poverty. This means that we are facing an enormous challenge, a historic challenge that will determine the future of our societies. We must ensure that the great social progress achieved and the prosperity promoted are genuinely effective ways of closing gaps and do not ultimately lead to exclusion and tension within our societies.

In order to evolve – to be effective – we need to adapt to new labour dynamics. We need to bring our own institutions, standards and procedures into line with this new reality, which is changing very rapidly from day to day. Throughout the world, relationships are changing because of globalization and because of technology, which is also changing every day at a pace that makes it difficult for States to keep up with it. We have new types of businesses; we have climate change, which some people continue to deny but which is battering the entire planet unceasingly; and, of course, we have new economic models.

Forms are changing but principles are not. Goals such as closing social gaps and promoting greater justice, guided by principles such as gender equality and the elimination of child labour, should continue to guide our work now and always.

Colombia has much to learn from many of you, but it also has much to share with you in this respect. The road to peace in my country is something that many people considered impossible just a few years ago. This achievement was catalysed in part by the social progress that I have already mentioned and shows that it is possible to open a new chapter in history and leave behind us decades of suffering, backwardness and violence.

The history of the ILO is proof of this; a quarter of a century ago, no one would have imagined that employers’ and workers’ representatives could be members of the ILO Governing Body or hold high-level posts in the supervisory bodies of this house.

Today, these are realities that are a source of pride for me, as the President of Colombia, and for all Colombians. We are still finding a balance between these realities and the multilateral systems that we need to defend. Many people are attacking these multilateral systems but we, the nations of the world, must defend them with vital support from the international community in order to leave behind war – which, in Colombia’s case, has caused so much suffering.

Moving forward, improving, ensuring the enjoyment of rights, meeting our commitments to the international community, proving to ourselves as Colombians and to the world that we are not condemned to be left behind or to despair – these are the goals that, as President, I have undertaken to achieve. I have also undertaken to maintain a good relationship with the ILO and to observe the highest standards of trust and learning. A relationship that could almost have been called adversarial is now one of cooperation as we endeavour to ensure that our relations with each other, and the relations between employers and workers, are increasingly constructive.

Last Wednesday, as I have mentioned, Colombia officially joined the OECD. This has strengthened our commitment to continue to apply, with ongoing oversight, the best public economic, social and, of course, labour policies.

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to come before you to reiterate that dialogue and action are the key to building – in a peaceful, efficient and unified way – the relationships that must govern the future of work because those who want peace must work for justice.

The President

Let me express our sincere appreciation, President Santos Calderón, for your inspiring words, which will certainly enrich our proceedings over the next few days and beyond. On behalf of my fellow Officers and of the delegates to the 107th Session of the Conference, we wish for a healthy birth for your grandchild and thank you again for coming to address our assembly today.

(The Conference adjourned at 12.25 p.m.)