

Activist arrested for disrupting lecture at Georgetown

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 16, 2010

An activist disrupted a lecture by former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe at Georgetown University in Washington, Sept. 13, to call attention to the former leader's human rights record.

Nicholas Udu-gama, a field organizer for School of Americas Watch, stood up and began applauding in the middle of a question and answer session with Uribe, who began his appointment as a "Distinguished Scholar" at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service Sept. 8.

Udu-gama was removed from the room by campus security and then arrested by District of Columbia metropolitan police.

Uribe is giving seminars and lectures at Jesuit-run Georgetown University. He is expected to teach for four weeks during the fall semester.

Though Uribe, who was president of Colombia from 2002 until this July, remains popular at home, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called him an "essential partner to the United States" in June, he has been the target of investigations by human rights organizations for alleged crimes committed during his administration.

Negative reactions to his appointment to the Georgetown post have been mounting.

Udu-gama told *NCR* Sept. 16 that he stood at the end of Uribe's prepared remarks and thanked the former president in a sarcastic tone for creating "social cohesion by threatening and physically eliminating any social opposition." After his arrest, he spent the night in jail.

Offering his reflection on the incident, Udu-gama said that "Georgetown is copying Uribe's manual" in dealing with dissent.

In an e-mailed statement to *NCR* Sept. 16, Georgetown University spokesperson Julie Green Bataille said: "As an academic community, we are committed to fostering the transmission of knowledge and supporting the free exchange of ideas. Georgetown is not endorsing the political views or government policies enacted by an individual, but realizing the value in allowing a world leader's experience to be part of campus dialogue."

Many of the allegations against Uribe stem from his handling of internal armed conflict in Colombia between guerilla groups and the Colombian armed forces.

In a June 2009 open letter to President Barack Obama, Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, outlined "serious concerns about the Uribe administration's record on and commitment to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law."

Among the many concerns listed in the letter, Roth emphasizes that several human rights organizations have documented that members of the Colombian army may have purposefully killed civilians to dress them as combatants and include them in their official body counts.

Roth cites a June 2009 report from the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, Philip Alston, which states "[t]he sheer number of cases, their geographic spread, and the diversity of military units implicated, indicate that these killings were carried out in a more or less systematic fashion by significant elements within the military."

Several statements opposing Uribe's appointment were sent by Jesuits in Latin America to *NCR* by e-mail Sept. 2.

Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino, a theologian at the University of Central America in El Salvador, called the appointment "shameful."

"Uribe is a symbol of the worst that has happened in the tragic conflict in Colombia," wrote Sobrino. "There is a great deal of blood involved here, a very great deal."

Jesuit Fr. Javier Giraldo, a noted human rights activist in Colombia, called the offer to Uribe "deeply offensive."

This appointment "places at high risk the ethical development of the young people who attend our university in Washington," wrote Giraldo.

In a mass e-mail Sept. 4 with the subject line "No human rights abusers on Georgetown faculty!," Pax Christi USA asked supporters to write a letter to Georgetown "asking them to revisit the decision to bring Uribe" to the university.

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