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U.S. Upgrades Colombia's Human Rights Score

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States said Friday that it had legally certified an improvement in [Colombia's](#) human rights record, allowing the use of \$32 million in withheld money from Washington for fighting gangs and drug smugglers.

A State Department spokesman, Ian Kelly, said Colombia must still make progress on human rights, and he described in a statement ["several disquieting challenges,"](#) including allegations of killings of civilians by soldiers and illegal surveillance.

But, he said, the country has "made significant efforts to increase the security of its people," justifying the certification to Congress that Colombia is meeting legal criteria on human rights and paramilitary groups and that the money can be released.

Colombian officials insist that they are trying to end human rights abuses, but critics say abuses remain widespread. The government has been battling a leftist insurgency for years.

The International Trade Union Confederation says Colombia is the deadliest country for labor rights advocates, with 49 killed last year, up from 39 in 2007, but fewer than the 78 killed in 2006.

A [United Nations](#) human rights investigator reported in June that [soldiers had killed hundreds of civilians](#), falsely identifying them as guerrillas slain in combat, to bolster body counts. Officials have vowed to eliminate that practice and punish those responsible.

"There is no question that improvement must be made in certain areas," Mr. Kelly said, adding, "Revelations of extrajudicial killings are evidence that the armed forces' far-reaching reforms have not fully taken hold."

The United States government will provide about \$545 million to Colombia this fiscal year, the State Department said.

Maria McFarland, senior Americas researcher at [Human Rights Watch](#), said that the decision was disappointing and that Colombia's government had responded to abuse allegations only after intense pressure.

Washington is trying to reassure Latin America that a proposal to give American forces greater access to Colombian military facilities will not create permanent United States bases.

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