

ENGLISH PRESS COVERAGE OF 2007 ROGER BALDWIN AWARD

Colombian human rights campaigner Ivan Cepeda named winner of Roger Baldwin Liberty Award

The Associated Press
Published: June 5, 2007

NEW YORK: Colombian activist Ivan Cepeda was named the winner of the 2007 Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty for his efforts to document thousands of cases of serious human rights abuses in his country, a New York-based advocacy group announced Tuesday.

"Ivan Cepeda is a courageous human rights defender who has overcome threats and intimidation to help draw greater attention to rights violations in Colombia," said Maureen Byrnes, executive director of Human Rights First, in a statement announcing the award.

The award citation recognized Cepeda as the founder and spokesman for a number of human rights organizations, including an umbrella group known as the National Movement for Victims of State Crimes.

Human Rights First credited Cepeda with joining with other human rights activists to document approximately 40,000 cases of rights violations committed in Colombia since 1966. It also recognized his "perseverance" in demonstrating that "paramilitary groups have committed serious human rights violations often in complicity with members of the Colombian armed forces."

Colombia is one of the deadliest places for human rights workers — the result of four decades of unabated fighting between leftist rebels, right-wing paramilitary groups and government forces.

Cepeda's father, a former leftist senator, was slain by paramilitary gunmen in 1994. Cepeda himself has twice been forced to live in exile due to repeated death threats and been the target of questionable criminal investigations, the citation said.

Byrnes expressed the hope that the Colombian government would allow Cepeda to freely carry out his human rights work in the future.

"This award recognized the importance of Ivan's human rights work and that of other Colombian human rights defenders who are unfairly stigmatized by the Colombian government," she said.

Colombia's right-wing President Alvaro Uribe lashed out against human rights groups in a 2003 speech, calling them "politickers for terrorism" and "communists in disguise." He later apologized.

Cepeda will be presented the award on June 20 in New York. The award, which is presented every other year to a human rights organization or activist outside the U.S., is named after Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union and the International League for Human Rights.

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/06/05/america/NA-GEN-US-Human-Rights-Award.php>

Colombian Activist Wins Human Rights Award



By VOA News
05 June 2007

A U.S. human rights organization has awarded a prize for human rights defenders to Colombian activist Ivan Cepeda.

Human Rights First Tuesday announced the winner of the prize, which is awarded every other year for outstanding work in international human rights.

Cepeda is the founder of a number of organizations that document human rights violations in Colombia. In a statement, the organization said he has demonstrated that paramilitary groups have committed serious human rights violations, often in complicity with members of the Colombian armed forces. It said he has helped in a process that has documented some 40,000 cases of rights violations since 1966.

The statement also said Cepeda has been unfairly targeted by the government for investigations, and has twice had to live in exile because of death threats. Cepeda's father was Colombian Senator Manuel Cepeda Vargas, who was killed by paramilitaries in 1994.

The prize is known as the Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty, named after the founder of the American Civil Liberties Union and the International League for Human Rights. Colombia is one of the deadliest places in the world for human rights workers due to its four decades of civil war.

<http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-06-05-voa43.cfm>

Colombian Human Rights Leader Ivan Cepeda Wins Roger Baldwin Liberty Award

NEW YORK, June 5 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Human Rights First, the New York-based human rights organization, today announced that Colombian human rights activist Ivan Cepeda has been awarded the prestigious 2007 Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty for international human rights defenders.

"Ivan Cepeda is a courageous human rights defender who has overcome threats and intimidation to help draw greater attention to rights violations in Colombia," said Human Rights First's Executive Director Maureen Byrnes.

Dr. Cepeda is the founder and spokesman of a number of human rights organizations including the National Movement for Victims of State Crimes, which consists of more than 200 organizations. Together with other human rights defenders he has participated in a process which has documented approximately 40,000 cases of serious human rights violations committed in Colombia since 1966. Through remarkable perseverance he has demonstrated that paramilitary groups have committed serious human rights violations often in complicity with members of the Colombian armed forces.

Dr. Cepeda's father, a Colombian Senator, was brutally killed in 1994. Ivan has twice been forced to live in exile due to death threats. Unfortunately, Colombian government authorities have exacerbated these threats by making denigrating comments about him. He also has been the target of spurious criminal investigations.

"This Award recognizes the importance of Ivan's human rights work and that of other Colombian human rights defenders who are unfairly stigmatized by the Colombian government," Ms. Byrnes said. "It is our hope that the Government of Colombia will allow Mr. Cepeda to operate freely in the future, and to carry out his important human rights work.

Dr. Cepeda will be presented with the Baldwin award in New York on June 20, 2007. He will also meet with international organizations and U.S. policymakers in Washington and New York.

Human Rights First received many nominations for extraordinary human rights activists from all over the world to receive the award. An international selection committee reviewed these nominations and recommended his selection to Human Rights First's Board of Directors.

The Award is named in honor of Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the International League for Human Rights. The Award is presented by Human Rights First every other year to a human rights organization or activist outside of the United States that has made a distinguished contribution to the protection and promotion of human rights.

Human Rights First is a leading international human rights advocacy organization based in New York City and Washington, DC. Since 1978, we have worked in the U.S. and abroad to create a secure and humane world -- advancing justice, human dignity, and respect for the rule of law. All of our activities are supported by private contributions. We accept no government funds. Visit our web site: <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/>.

http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/news_press_release,117119.shtml

Colombian Rights Activist Says Paramilitary Units a Danger to Country

Monday, June 25, 2007

By Ashley Matthews - Activist Ivan Cepeda told a Capitol Hill audience that Colombia needs to demobilize paramilitary forces for the country gain stability.

Washington, D.C. - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - infoZine - Speaking through a translator, Cepeda spoke to staff members and human rights activists on Monday.

Cepeda has documented thousands of abuses in his home country. He is the founder of and spokesman for several human rights organizations, including the National Movement for Victims of State Crimes, an umbrella organization made up of more than 200 groups.

"With various members of Congress during the week that I've been here in the U.S., we've tried to communicate a few simple messages, with the idea that these are things that should be debated in the U.S.," Cepeda said. "They should be things that U.S. policy makers communicate."

Since the 1970s, there has been conflict between the Colombian government and right-wing paramilitary groups and leftist rebels. The country is also plagued by drug trafficking and guerilla insurgencies, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which uses the Spanish acronym FARC.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe was elected in 2002 on the promise that he would use military pressure to demobilize groups like FARC and decrease drug trafficking.

Cepeda disagreed with Uribe's claim that the human rights situation has improved. Uribe has visited Washington twice to talk about the state of human rights affairs in Colombia, most recently earlier this month.

"Today, we're going to talk about pre-existing situations, which we believe shows that

Uribe is not making a strong argument," Cepeda said. "We will present these situations to show a lack of improvement to members of Congress here."

The U.S. assists Plan Colombia, which was created primarily to combat the narcotics trade.

"Colombia is one of Latin America's oldest democracies, and the U.S. has long enjoyed close and friendly relations," U.S. State Department spokesman Eric Watnik said. "Most recently, U.S. policy towards Colombia supports the Colombian government's efforts to strengthen its democratic institutions."

Cepeda said evidence links government officials to the ongoing violence.

"Colombia is living in a serious political conflict right now, a serious political situation, which in the media has become known as the 'para-political' scandal," he said. "This crisis has unfolded because the Supreme Court of Colombia has begun investigations that are showing that there are connections between paramilitary leaders and politicians."

This connection is making it hard to trust demobilization statistics, Cepeda said. According to the International Crisis Group, more than 80 paramilitary groups operate in different regions of the country with up to 9,000 combatants.

Cepeda said this would make the number of active paramilitary groups the same as when Uribe assumed the presidency.

"I want to note that the drug trafficking in Colombia continues unabated, despite the fact that there has been a supposed demobilization," he said.

In 1994, Cepeda witnessed paramilitary gunmen assassinate his father, Manuel Cepeda Vargas. Vargas was a senator who belonged to the Patriotic Union, a leftist political party.

"My wife and I now have spent 12 years struggling for justice in the case of my father and other politicians who were part of the Patriotic Union party who were assassinated," he said.

The investigation almost cost Cepeda his life.

"We were able to leave Colombia and go into exile in the year 2000 in order to save our own lives," he said.

Cepeda faces slander and libel charges in Colombia for implicating government officials in human rights violations. Cepeda joked that he is "impressed" with the attorney general's promptness in investigating his crimes, while the government still has not been investigated for possible wrongdoings.

Andrew Hudson, a Helton fellow with the Human Rights Defender program of Human Rights First, called the charges against Cepeda "baseless and politically motivated."

Cepeda and his wife returned to Colombia in 2004. Their apartment has bulletproof glass on the doors and windows. They also ride around Bogotá in a bulletproof vehicle.

Human Rights First, a New-York based human rights organization, chose Cepeda as the winner of the 2007 Roger Baldwin Medal of Liberty. The medal, which Human Rights First awards every two years, was presented to Cepeda on Wednesday in New York.

Hudson said although Cepeda is "modest," he is deserving of the medal.

Hudson said Cepeda won out over other nominees "for the really groundbreaking work he has done for the last 12 years since the death of his father."

Roger Baldwin founded the American Civil Liberties Union and the International League for Human Rights.

<http://www.infozine.com/news/stories/op/storiesView/sid/23682/>