

**Remarks of Nimia Vargas, Network of Chocó Women
NDI 25th Anniversary Dinner Celebration
Washington, DC, May 10, 2010**

Thank you so much President Toledo for your kind introduction.

Honorable Madeleine Albright, Chairman of NDI,

Mr. Ken Wollack, President of NDI,

Distinguished guests, and in particular, Honorable Morgan Tsvangirai, Prime Minister of the Republic of Zimbabwe,

It is a great privilege to be here with you tonight and to have the honor to accept the 2010 Madeleine K. Albright Grant on behalf of the Network of Women of Chocó.

Let me say just a few words to you about our Network of Women, our challenges, our mission and what this award means to us as Colombian women from the region of Chocó.

More than half of the population of Colombia is women. We are 40 percent of the labor market and 30 out of every 100 homes in the country is headed by a woman. Yet out of 102 members elected to the Senate in March, only 19 were women.

The department of Chocó, where we were born and for which our network has worked for the past 18 years, is the only department in South America with two coasts, on the Caribbean and the Pacific; it is the rainiest ecoregion on the planet; we live in the most biologically diverse region of the world, but one of the most difficult in which to grow food. The world will surely cast its eyes on our land in the coming years.

More than 80 percent of Chocoans are Afro-descendants, and we share the land with our indigenous and *mestizo* brothers, which makes us a happy and diverse people.

Afro-Colombian families are those who most suffer from the ongoing violence in our country, and many have had to relocate to protect their lives. They are among the poorest in Colombia. In these families, it is women over 45 who die most frequently from preventable causes. And over the last five years, violence against women has increased.

Chocó was born as a territory where 120 slaves declared their freedom, and that has made us citizens who fight for freedom every day, for freedom with guarantees for a better life, so that our children will be happy.

It is there where we, the members of the network, were born, a network now with more than 1,000 women who in different regions continue to fight for our rights and for the rights of our people. We fight through peaceful initiatives that allow us to be seen, to participate in politics, to demand our rights, to productively support our families and, above all, to build a better society.

We work to strengthen women's political education and training; we work in our municipalities to ensure that they generate opportunities for women to participate in generating solutions. We use our restaurant, *La Paila de mi Abuela* – “My Grandmother's Frying Pan” – to generate income for these initiatives and at the same time sustain Choco's traditional food, the food we have eaten since we were children.

It is a source of pride for the Departmental Network of Chocoan Women to be here today with all of you. We accept this award as a recognition for our daily struggles and this fills us with satisfaction and reinforces our commitment. We are sure that the Chocoan people share these emotions and feel grateful that we have been distinguished with the Madeleine K. Albright Grant.

Receiving an award inspired by a brave, wise and persistent woman who has served as Secretary of State of this country—the first woman to do so—greatly moves us. Receiving this recognition from NDI and knowing that we are working together to make democracy deliver and find ways to reduce poverty gives us a greater sense of responsibility and determination.

Again, we thank you for this award, and we take this opportunity to recall the words of Maya Angelou, who reminded us of the struggle of Afro-descendant women around the world. “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise. I rise. I rise. I rise.”