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Colombia: The reality of trade unionism Case studies

Bellow are some of the cases included in Amnesty International's report *Colombia: Killings, arbitrary detentions, and death threats -- the reality of trade unionism in Colombia* (AI Index: AMR 23/001/2007)

Javier Correa, Luis García, Domingo Flores and Nelson Pérez - SINALTRAINAL

In recent years, the food workers' union SINALTRAINAL has been involved in labour disputes, often with large multinational companies. Human rights violations have often coincided with periods of labour dispute.

On 10 February 2007 a written paramilitary death threat addressed to SINALTRAINAL members was pushed under the door of the ASTDEMP offices in Bucaramanga, Santander Department in the centre of Colombia. The death threat named SINALTRAINAL activists Javier Correa, Luis García, Domingo Flores and Nelson Pérez, and accused them of being "terrorist Coca Cola trade unionists". The trade unionists were warned to put an end to the "trouble in the Coca Cola company as enough damage has already been caused" and that if they failed to do so, they would become military targets of the Paramilitary group "Águilas Negras". The death threat was on a sheet of paper with "AUC Aguilas Negras" (the Auto Defensas Unidas de Colombia, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia a paramilitary umbrella group) at the top of the page and supposedly came from the "Aguilas Negras Front Lebrija" ("Frente Aguilas Negras Lebrija").

In a letter to Amnesty International on 7 June 2007, Coca Cola Company explained that it had communicated with the Colombian authorities on several occasions in respect to threats against SINALTRAINAL activists calling on the authorities to undertake investigations into these threats and guarantee the safety of the threatened trade unionists.

Amnesty International is not aware of significant advances in any investigations on this case.

Luciano Enrique Romero Molina - SINALTRAINAL

On 11 September 2005, Luciano Enrique Romero Molina's body was found with his hands tied and more than 40 stab wounds. The body was found in the Las Palmeras farm in the La Nevada neighbourhood of Valledupar, north east Colombia, an area believed to be under the control of paramilitaries, despite the fact that paramilitary forces operating in the region were supposedly engaged in a process of demobilization between December 2004 and March 2006.

Luciano Romero had been a leader of the Cesar branch of SINALTRAINAL and of the human rights organization Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee (Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, CSPP). On 28 February 2002, SINALTRAINAL had presented a series of demands for improved working conditions to the Nestlé-CICOLAC company.

When these demands were not met, the trade union undertook strike action on 12 July 2002. Paramilitary death threats against SINALTRAINAL leaders increased after strike action was initiated. In October 2002, Luciano Romero and other colleagues were sacked from their jobs at the Nestlé-CICOLAC plant in Valledupar. Luciano Romero was threatened, reportedly by paramilitary groups and forced to flee his home and then the country, before returning to Colombia in April 2005.

Luciano Romero had been due to travel to Switzerland to attend a meeting on 29 to 30 October 2005 as a witness to death threats against trade unionists representing workers in Nestlé plants in Colombia.

Nestlé-CICOLAC informed Amnesty International that it had called for an investigation into the killing of Luciano Romero.

Amnesty International is not aware of significant advances in any investigations on this case.

Alejandro Uribe - FEDEAGROMISBOL

On 19 September 2006, Alejandro Uribe Chacón was killed as he was on his way back to Mina Gallo, municipality of Morales, Bolívar Department, reportedly by members of the Colombian army's Nueva Granada Anti-Aircraft Battalion (Batallón Antiaéreo Nueva Granada).

Alejandro was a leader of the Association of Miners of Bolívar Department (Asociación de Mineros del Bolívar), and President of the Community Action Council (Junta de Acción Comunal), of the community of Mina Gallo. The Association of Miners of Bolívar Department is linked to the Agro-mining Federation of the south of Bolívar Department (Federación Agrominera del Sur de Bolívar, FEDEAGROMISBOL).

Witnesses said they saw soldiers taking Alejandro's body towards a military base in San Luquitas in Santa Rosa Municipality. According to information received by Amnesty International, on 20 September, the army presented Alejandro's body to the judicial authorities as that of a guerrilla killed in combat. According to reports, witnesses have said that over the last year members of the Nueva Granada Anti-Aircraft Battalion have threatened to kill FEDEAGROMISBOL leaders. Soldiers have also reportedly told local residents that their operations aim to guarantee the presence of international corporate mining interests in the area. This is an area in which the gold-mining company AngloGold Ashanti (Kedahda S.A.) has interests. Alejandro and other local miners had opposed the arrival of this company in the area.

AngloGold Ashanti wrote to Amnesty International on 5 June 2007 stating that it could not comment on "the intentions of the Colombian armed forces regarding their presence in the Bolívar Department". Referring to the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, the company also informed AI that AngloGold Ashanti was "developing our internal systems for ensuring the implementation of the Principles throughout our organisation".

Amnesty International is not aware of significant advances in any investigations on this case.

Rodolfo Vecino Acevedo - Oil Workers' Union (Unión Sindical Obrera de la Industria del Petróleo, USO)

On 25 November 2006, gunmen travelling on two motorcycles opened fire on the bullet-proof car assigned by the state oil company ECOPETROL to USO leader Rodolfo Vecino Acevedo on the road between Barranquilla, Atlántico Department, and Cartagena, Bolívar Department.

Rodolfo was not travelling in the car but his wife, Martha Cecilia Marrugo Ahumada, his bodyguard Álvaro Marrugo and an acquaintance, Edward Martínez were and managed to escape unharmed.

Three days later, the USO received an e-mailed death threat in which the Bloque Norte of the AUC reportedly claimed responsibility for the attempt on the life of Rodolfo Vecino and announced its intention to kill USO and student activists in the north of the country. The paramilitary death threat gave USO leaders and student activists at the University of Cartagena 20 days to abandon the region:

"... DESPITE OUR DEMOBILIZATION WE RETAIN OUR MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE POWER FOR THIS REASON WE WANT THE FOLLOWING TO HAPPEN SON-OF-A-BITCH USO TRADE UNIONISTS SON-OF-A-BITCH CARTAGENA UNIVERSITY LEADERS AND THOSE THAT CAMOUFLAGE THEMSELVES IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES YOU HAVE 20 DAYS TO LEAVE YOUR CITIES... IF YOU DO NOT OBEY... BE PREPARED FOR THE CONSEQUENCES WE KNOW EVERYTHING SO AVOID PROBLEMS".

Rodolfo Vecino has received other threats over the last few years.

In July 2005, Rodolfo was threatened by the Urban Front (Frente Urbano) of the AUC. In a written statement, the paramilitaries threatened Rodolfo and his family if he did not abandon his union work.

According to media reports, in May 2006, an unidentified individual approached Rodolfo Vecino while he was attending a meeting in Barranquilla and informed him that there was a plan, coordinated by paramilitaries, security forces and business interests, to kill him and two other USO members.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights of the OAS has called on the Colombian authorities to take measures to guarantee the safety of Rodolfo Vecino and his family.

Amnesty International is not aware of significant advances in any investigations on this case.

Miguel Angel Bobadilla - FENSUAGRO

On 11 May 2006, members of the Joint Action Units for Personal Liberty (Grupos de Acción Unificada por la Libertad Personal, GAULA), a security force anti-kidnapping unit detained Miguel Angel Bobadilla and his partner Nieves Mayusa in Bogotá. According to information received by Amnesty International, during the operation the security forces attempted to force the couple's elder child to say that their parents were FARC guerrillas. Miguel Ángel is a leader of FENSUAGRO. His name, together with that of other national leaders of FENSUAGRO, reportedly appears in the death list presented to paramilitaries by Colombia's Civilian Intelligence Department (DAS).

According to information received by Amnesty International, on 15 March 2006, Miguel Ángel was followed by two unidentified men when he left his office in Bogotá. In addition, unidentified individuals have kept his office under constant surveillance. Amnesty International was also told that prior to his detention, two individuals claiming to be judicial police officers had gone to his home demanding to know his whereabouts. The Office of the Attorney General denied that they had sent any agents to the house.

Nieves Mayusa is also a member of FENSUAGRO and belongs to a family which has been closely associated with the Colombian Communist Party and the Patriotic Union Party (Unión Patriótica, UP). Since the UP was founded in 1985, more than 3,000 UP members have been killed or been victims of enforced disappearances, the vast majority carried out by the security forces and paramilitaries.

Television reports have presented Miguel Ángel as a FARC member involved in kidnappings and accused him of using telephones issued by the government's protection programme to coordinate these operations.

According to information received by Amnesty International, shortly after their arrest, Nieves Mayusa's sisters Carmen Mayusa, an ANTHOC leader, and Janeth Mayusa, a FENSUAGRO activist, were also detained by the security forces. Carmen Mayusa's name subsequently appeared in a written paramilitary death threat against ANTHOC. According to the latest information received, they all remain in detention.

César Augusto Fonseca Morales, José Rafael Fonseca Cassiani, and José Ramón Fonseca Cassiani Morales -- SINTRAGRICOLAS

On 2 September 2003, three members of SINTRAGRICOLAS (which is affiliated to FENSUAGRO), César Augusto Fonseca Morales, José Rafael Fonseca Cassiani, and José Ramón Fonseca Cassiani Morales were killed, reportedly by paramilitaries, in Ponedera Municipality, Atlántico Department. Their dismembered bodies were found the next day. According to information received by Amnesty International, the acting president of SINTRAGRICOLAS, Víctor Jiménez Fruto, was abducted and subsequently forcibly disappeared on 22 October 2002 in the municipality of Ponedera. On 24 July 2002 he had lodged a complaint with the Office of the Attorney General regarding repeated death threats he had received. His predecessor, Saúl Colpas Castro, was shot dead in front of his family on 13 July 2001 in the Puerto Giraldo area of the municipality of Ponedera.

On 17 May 2005, SINTRAGRICOLAS member José María Maldonado was killed in the municipality of Ponedera, allegedly by two paramilitaries travelling on a motorcycle. He had reportedly survived a previous attempt on his life carried out 15 days previously. All the SINTRAGRICOLAS members mentioned above were reportedly on the DAS list.

Amnesty International is not aware of significant advances in any investigations on this case.

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