

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 23/043/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 217
1 September 2004

Colombia: Indigenous hostages must be released immediately

Amnesty International has condemned the kidnapping of several indigenous leaders by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) and called for their immediate release.

The Governor of the indigenous community of Toribío, Plinio Trochez; Mayor of Toribío Municipality, Arquímedes Vitonás Noscue; former mayor of Toribío Municipality, Gilberto Muñoz Coronado; Acting Governor of the indigenous community of San Francisco Rubén Darío Escue; and their driver, Erminson Velasco, were kidnapped after they set out from the department of Cauca on 22 August. The group was travelling for a meeting of indigenous leaders in Altamira in the municipality of San Vicente del Caguán, department of Caquetá.

The FARC are also reported to have kidnapped Orlando Hernández Guanga, an A'wa indigenous leader and mayor of the municipality of Ricaurte, on 25 August while he was travelling to the town of Ipiales, department of Nariño.

"These latest examples of kidnapping and hostage-taking show a blatant disregard for the lives of civilians and represent a flagrant breach of international humanitarian law. The FARC guerrillas should immediately and unconditionally release the hostages," Amnesty International said.

A delegation of indigenous leaders has arrived in the area of the kidnapping in an attempt to negotiate the release of their colleagues. The delegation has called on the Colombian army to refrain from any rescue attempt and not to follow the delegation of indigenous leaders into the region.

"The Colombian government has the duty to protect its citizens and to bring perpetrators of such violent acts to justice. However, the authorities must ensure that any use of force and firearms is fully consistent with international standards and will not put in jeopardy the lives of the hostages," Amnesty International said.

Background

Indigenous leaders have repeatedly been killed and threatened by guerrilla forces and army-backed paramilitaries. Frequently, these attacks and threats stem from the insistence made by indigenous communities that they should not be used as pawns in the conflict. Both sides in the conflict often accuse indigenous communities of collaborating with their respective enemies as a result of their refusal to be controlled by the armed actors.

On 8 November 2002, Amnesty International wrote to the FARC reiterating its condemnation of the guerrilla group's continued practice of kidnapping. The organization called on the FARC to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all those people it was holding as hostages and to guarantee the safety of members of the armed forces the FARC was holding captive. Amnesty International reminded the FARC that such action would be in line with its obligations under the International Humanitarian Law. However, the FARC did not respond to the letter and has failed to demonstrate a serious commitment to abide by International Humanitarian Law.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>