

PUBLIC

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UA 56/06 Fear for safety

COLOMBIA Trade unionists and social activists in Barrancabermeja, Department of Santander

A gunman allegedly from an army-backed paramilitary group has killed a trade union member in the city of Barrancabermeja, Santander Department. The same day a regional newspaper had reported that a paramilitary group was threatening to kill all members of trade unions and social organizations standing in the region in the 12 March congressional elections. Amnesty International believes that all trade unionists and other social activists in Barrancabermeja are in grave danger.

Héctor Díaz Serrano, a member of the oil workers' union *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO) was shot while he was on his way to work on 2 March. That morning the newspaper *Vanguardia Liberal* had reported that a paramilitary group calling itself the *Comando Regional del Magdalena Medio*, Magdalena Medio Regional Command, had issued a statement in which it threatened to kill trade unionists and other social activists running for Congress in the 12 March elections, including members of the USO, the trade union umbrella organization *Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores* (CUT), Trade Union Congress, *Asociación de Trabajadores Departamentales* (ASTDEMP), Association of Departmental Workers, the *Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Santander* (USITRAS), Santander Workers' Trade Union, and an organization that assists people who have been forced to leave their homes by the internal armed conflict between the security forces and guerrillas forces, the *Coordinación Metropolitana de Desplazados*. The paramilitary group stated that it was committed to the government-sponsored process under which paramilitary groups are supposedly demobilizing, but that "*No obstante continuamos con la lucha hasta eliminar el último guerrillero terrorista y sus auxiliares infiltrados*", "Notwithstanding, we will continue with this fight until we have eliminated the last guerrilla terrorist and their auxiliaries."

In the same report, *Vanguardia Liberal* quoted the regional police commander as saying that the paramilitary group responsible for the death threat had demobilized a few weeks before and that some of the trade unionists standing for election in the region were already being protected by a special security detail. However, the same commander stated that he had not heard of the paramilitary statement, nor of any threats made against trade unionists or social activists standing in the upcoming election.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The government of President Alvaro Uribe Vélez has been engaged in a process of dialogue and a demobilization of the army-backed paramilitary groups. Amnesty International is still documenting paramilitary human rights violations carried out in collusion with the security forces in areas where paramilitary units have supposedly demobilized.

Over recent years army-backed paramilitary groups have maintained a strong presence in the city of Barrancabermeja, despite the heavy military presence in the city. These groups have killed a number of trade unionists, human rights defenders and other social activists whom they claim are "guerrilla collaborators".

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of members of the USITRAS, CUT, USO and ASTDEMP trade unions, and the *Coordinación Metropolitana de Desplazados*, whom a paramilitary group has threatened to kill, particularly members of these organizations standing for congressional elections;
- urging the authorities to take all measures necessary to guarantee their safety, as deemed appropriate by those under threat themselves;
- urging them to order a full and impartial investigation into the killing of Héctor Díaz Serrano, to publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- calling on the authorities to take decisive action to confront and dismantle paramilitary groups operating in the region and to break their links with the security forces, in line with repeated UN recommendations.

APPEALS TO:

President

Señor Presidente Alvaro Uribe Vélez

Presidente de la República, Palacio Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-2, Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Fax: +57 1 337 5890

Salutation: Dear President Uribe / Excmo. Sr. Presidente Uribe

Minister of Interior

Dr. Sabas Pretelt de la Vega

Av. Jiménez No. 8-89, Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Fax: +57 1 560 4630 (Please keep trying)

Salutation: Dear Sir / Estimado Sr. Ministro

Police

Coronel Fernando Torres

Departamento de Policía de Magdalena Medio

Avenida Circunvalar c/ Carrera 24

Barrancabermeja, Santander, COLOMBIA

Fax: +57 7 611 4262

Salutation: Dear Sir / Estimado Sr. Coronel

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Colombia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 21 April 2006.