

## TRADE UNIONISTS UNDER ATTACK IN COLOMBIA

### Defending the rights of members of trade union confederations

**Pedro Orozco Pérez**, an adviser to the Atlántico branch of the CUT trade union confederation was shot by two unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle in Barranquilla on 3 October 2005; he subsequently died of his wounds. On 4 October 2005, **Rafael Angel Charris Charris**, a former leader of the Atlántico Department branch of the CUT, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle in the municipality of Santo Tomás, Atlántico Department. Jesús Tovar Castro, Henry Gordon and Tomás Ramos Quiroz, all leaders of the Atlántico Department branch of the CUT, were among several trade unionists whose names appeared on the death threat delivered to the offices of the food workers' union SINALTRAINAL on 15 May 2006.

Members of trade union confederations in Colombia, and in particular the Trade Union Congress (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores, CUT), continued to be the targets of human rights violations. These attacks appear to be part of a coordinated strategy to undermine trade union work at the national level. National confederations play an active role in bringing to world attention the human rights crisis facing trade unionists in Colombia.

Trade unionists are frequently labelled as subversive by the security forces and paramilitaries. Such criticisms are often followed by human rights violations which also frequently coincide with periods of labour unrest or negotiations over working conditions.

### Who is responsible for these human rights violations?

Many of the human rights abuses committed against trade unionists cannot be attributed to any particular group. However, of those where there is clear evidence of responsibility, the security forces and army-backed paramilitary groups are responsible for the overwhelming majority. A number of cases have been attributed to guerrilla organizations.

Over the past four decades, Colombia has been riven by an armed conflict between the security forces and paramilitaries on the one side and on the other by guerrilla forces, the largest of which is the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC). Although there has been a decrease in certain types of violence associated with the armed conflict, the human rights situation in Colombia remains dire. All parties to the conflict continue to commit war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international law.

The conflict provides a useful cover for those seeking to expand and protect economic interests. Over 60 per cent of the more than 3 million internally displaced people in Colombia have been

forced from their homes and lands in areas of mineral, agricultural or other economic importance.

Although more than 30,000 paramilitaries have reportedly been "demobilized" in the last three years in a controversial government-sponsored demobilization process, there is strong evidence that paramilitary groups continue to operate and have been responsible for human rights violations including threats, killings, and enforced disappearances. Sometimes these crimes have been committed with the acquiescence of or in collusion with the security forces.

For more information see Amnesty International's report, *Colombia: Killings, arbitrary detentions and deaths threats – the reality of trade unionism in Colombia* (AI Index: AMR 23/001/2007) available at [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

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Trade unionists in Colombia are at grave risk of human rights abuses. Successive Colombian governments have implemented a series of policies to improve the protection of trade unionists. However, this has not effectively guaranteed the safety of trade union activists

and their families. The long-term security of trade unionists depends on decisive action by the Colombian authorities to end the impunity which protects the vast majority of those responsible for the human rights abuses against them.

## ACT NOW

Please write to:

- ▶ **Presidente de la República de Colombia**, Dr. Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Bogotá, Colombia

Express concern at the human rights crisis faced by trade unionists in Colombia and urge him to ensure the Colombian authorities take decisive measures, in accordance with the wishes of those at risk, to guarantee their safety. Call on him to ensure that the recommendations of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights are fully implemented. Urge him to ensure that the death threats against and killings of members of trade union confederations, and in particular the CUT, are fully and impartially investigated, that the results are made public and that those responsible are brought to justice. Remind him that in June 2006 the Colombian government signed a Tripartite Agreement with trade unions and employers in which it committed itself to ensure an end to impunity for human rights abuses against trade unionists. Urge him to ensure that the criminal special

investigations unit of Colombia's Office of the Attorney General, set up as a result of this Agreement to investigate violations and abuses against trade unionists is adequately staffed and funded.

- ▶ **Your Minister of Foreign Affairs**, raising these points and asking how your government is going to call on the Colombian authorities to fulfil these recommendations. If your foreign ministry is in contact with guerrilla groups, ask officials to call on these groups to put an end to killings of trade unionists.
- ▶ **Your trade union**, urging it to raise these issues with the Colombian government and your own government.

Several sections of Amnesty International are undertaking other campaign work on the situation of trade unionists in Colombia. You may wish to contact the Amnesty International section in your country to check if it is participating in this campaign work and how you can get involved.

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