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EXTERNAL -- FOR RESPONSE

Colombia: Amnesty International condemns the murders of three US environmentalists

Amnesty International condemns the cold-blooded killing of US environmental activists Ingrid Washinawatok, Lahe'ena Gay and Terence Freitas, who were seized by armed men in Colombia on 25 February 1999. Their bound and blindfolded bodies were found on 4 March dumped over the border in Venezuela. They had been shot dead.

The organization -- which opposes and condemns the taking and holding of hostages and the deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians in all cases -- is calling on the Colombian and Venezuelan authorities to ensure a full and impartial investigation into the circumstances of the deaths of the three and that those responsible are brought to justice.

The three US citizens had travelled to Colombia in February as part of an international campaign by environmental groups to support the U'wa indigenous community in the north-east of the country. On 25 February their car was intercepted by two armed gunmen in civilian clothes as they travelled to the airport in Saravena, Arauca department, to take a flight to the capital Bogotá.

Colombian military authorities and US officials immediately attributed responsibility to the armed opposition group, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). FARC commanders have, however, publicly denied responsibility.

Lahe'ena Gay was the director of the Hawaii-based Pacific Cultural Conservancy International, Ingrid Washinawatok a native American and Terence Freitas an environmental scientist who had been coordinating the international campaign in favour of the U'wa since 1997 and had visited Colombia on several previous occasions.

For several years the U'wa, with the help of environmentalists in the USA, have been fighting plans by an oil company affiliated to the US Occidental Petroleum Corporation (OPC) to exploit oil deposits on their ancestral lands.

According to reports, during a visit in March 1998 Terence Freitas had been followed and threatened by gunmen believed to be members of a right-wing paramilitary group and was also briefly detained and interrogated by police on the U'wa reservation. He had also reportedly received death threats at his home in the USA, presumably as a result of his work in defence of the U'wa community.

The OPC had been carrying out seismic surveying and oil exploration in an area known as the Samore block in Boyacá department. Part of the area under exploration covers U'wa ancestral lands and the community threatened to commit mass suicide if the work continued. As a result of the controversy the OPC suspended operations in the area.

Background

Despite moves to initiate peace talks to negotiate an end to Colombia's long-running armed conflict, human rights abuses continue to escalate. All parties to the conflict -- the Colombian armed forces, paramilitary groups operating with their support or acquiescence, the FARC and other armed opposition groups -- are responsible for serious and widespread abuses. Principal victims of the spiralling conflict continue to be civilians: community leaders, trade unionists, political and social activists and human rights defenders.

Kidnapping and hostage taking by armed opposition groups are widespread in Colombia. During 1998 at least 600 people, including several foreigners, were kidnapped by armed opposition groups. Most were released after weeks or months in captivity. However, others were killed during rescue attempts or when ransom demands were not met.

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