

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK ACTION

Date: 30 January 2001

Duration: 1 March 2001

COLOMBIA: Human rights activists in Barrancabermeja under attack

Summary

The campaign by army-backed paramilitaries to drive all human rights defenders from the town of Barrancabermeja in Colombia's Magdalena Medio region is reaching a critical stage.

Government action is needed now more than ever if the human rights organizations are to be able to continue their vital work.

On the morning of 27 January, two men who said they were members of the paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia, came to a womens' community centre (*Casa de la Mujer*) run by the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP), Popular Women's Organization, in the Prado-Campestre district of the city of Barrancabermeja. They announced that they had come to take over the centre and demanded the keys from the women activists. When they refused to give them the keys, the paramilitaries threatened to come back later.

One of the men returned the same day, threatening a female activist and stealing her mobile phone. He reportedly said that the paramilitaries would take the centre by force and "blow the door down and trample whoever stands in their way" (*se tomarían la casa "tumbando la puerta y pasando por encima de quien fuera"*). The man was arrested by the police, but was released without charge two days later.

Earlier this year, on 3 January, several people thought to belong to the paramilitary group AUC came to the homes of José Guillermo Larios and Iván Madero Vergel of the *Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos* (CREDHOS), Regional Human Rights Committee in Barrancabermeja, threatening them and their families. Since then Iván Madero Vergel has received a number of threatening telephone calls at his home, reminding him that he is considered to be a "military target", and accusing him of being a guerrilla collaborator or supporter.

The renewed threats against CREDHOS and OFP workers coincide with an increased presence of paramilitary forces in the north-eastern districts of Barrancabermeja since December 2000 (See UA 340/00, AMR 23/90/00, 6 November 2000 and follow-up and UA 20/01, AMR 23/006/01, 26 January 2001). Despite a heavy security force presence in the area, paramilitary forces have apparently been operating unhindered, and are reported to have set up checkpoints and to have killed several people in recent weeks.

The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) has called for the Colombian authorities to guarantee the protection and security of

both CREDHOS and OFP activists but as yet, no concrete measures have been taken which will effectively do this.

For further information see UA 22/01 (AMR 23/008/2001) and UA 12/01 (AMR 23/003/2001).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The OFP is a grassroots human rights organization which works principally with women, children, youth groups and displaced communities *to promote human rights and present civilian alternatives to armed conflict. Some of their areas of work are to provide advice services for women on legal, health and welfare issues and to organize training workshops and adult education for women and young people. The organization carries out its work collectively through casa de la mujer community centres where women, youth groups and displaced people hold workshops, meetings and social events. It is also through the casas de la mujer that the OFP provide subsidised meals for the local community.*

CREDHOS has played a vital role in drawing international attention to human rights abuses committed in Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio region by guerrillas, the security forces and their paramilitary allies. CREDHOS activists suffer continuous threats and harassment, and have been the subject of death threats and killings.

RECOMMENDED ACTION BY HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK:

Please participate in some or all of the following actions:

1. Send letters, in Spanish if possible, to the local authorities with jurisdiction over Barrancabermeja:

- expressing your concern for the safety of the human rights workers, including members of the OFP and CREDHOS, in Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio in the light of the recent threats and attempts by armed groups to coopt their projects;
- urging the authorities to take effective action in line with requests by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States to protect human rights workers in Barrancabermeja so that they can carry out their work with fear or threat of reprisal;
- highlighting the fact that the important and legitimate work of human rights defenders is clearly recognized in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (*Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*) adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1998;
- reminding the authorities of their obligation to implement the two resolutions *Human Rights Defenders in the Americas: Support for the individuals, groups and organization of civil*

society working to promote and protect human rights in the Americas adopted by the Organization of American States (OAS) in June 1999 [AG/RES.1671 (XXIX-0/99)] and in June 2000 [AG/RES. 1711 (XXX-0/00)] ;

- calling on the authorities to take effective action against paramilitary groups in the Barrancabermeja area, in line with the Colombian government's own commitments and UN recommendations to combat and dismantle these groups.

2. Send your national flag to the OFP. This expression of solidarity will be a very visible demonstration of the international support that the organization has and will help to protect them from further harassment.

3. Contact the press and women's organizations in your country. Ask them to publish an appeal on behalf of the OFP in their magazines or other publications.

Addresses:

NGO

Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)

Carrera 22 No 52B-36, Barrancabermeja, Santander, Colombia

LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

Commander of the 5th Brigade of the Armed Forces of Colombia

General Martín Orlando Carreño Sandoval

Cra. 33 # 14. Barrio Los Pinos, Bucaramanga, Colombia

Fax: +57 76 359189/+57 76 334390

Salutation: Dear General/ Estimado General

Commander of the Batallón Nueva Granada

Coronel Martínez Bonilla

Fax: +57 76 223348/+57 76 229425

Salutation: Dear Colonel/ Estimado Coronel

Commander of the National Police in Barrancabermeja

Coronel Jaime Eduardo Martínez Santamaría

Fax: +57 76 229553

Salutation: Dear Colonel/ Estimado Coronel

Mayor of Barrancabermeja

Sr. Julio Cesar Ardila Torres

Fax: +57 76 622 90 91

Dear Sir/Estimado Señor

In case of any doubts or queries regarding this action please contact:

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