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Death threats/Fear for safety

11 June 1993

COLOMBIA: Alfonso PALACIO, community leader

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of community leader Alfonso Palacio after receiving reports that he has been the victim of serious threats and harassment by members of the Colombian armed forces.

Alfonso Palacio is President of the municipal council of Rio Viejo, Bolívar department, and well known locally for his work with the grassroots movements in the south of Bolívar. He has reportedly been the victim of repeated threats and harassment by members of the armed forces based in the area since 1985 when he became treasurer, *fiscal*, of the campesino movement in the south of Bolívar.

In 1986 concern for his safety grew when an allegation (later retracted) that he was a guerrilla leader appeared in a local paper. The threats against him then intensified following his election as municipal councillor for the town of San Pablo, for the left-wing coalition party Unión Patriótica, Patriotic Union, and also following official *denuncias*, complaints, made by him against the armed forces for alleged human rights violations. In 1990 he was forced to flee from his home when he heard reports of a plan to assassinate him. Sources state that members of the armed forces have repeatedly made accusations against him, both directly and indirectly, saying that his work with the *campesino*, peasant farmer, communities of the region has been on behalf of the guerrillas, accusations which he has constantly refuted.

On 6 May 1993, eye-witnesses state that soldiers from the army's Batallón Nariño, Nariño Battalion, based in the town of Magangue, illegally searched Alfonso Palacio's home and destroyed his property. He was away working at the time and the soldiers reportedly remained in the house for several days, waiting for his return. On leaving, they are reported to have said that while this time he was safe, they would soon "fix" him. There is increasing concern for his safety.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The southern part of Bolívar department lies in the largely rural area known as the Magdalena Medio. This area has been a focus of political violence for several years, following the emergence of guerrilla groups in the 1960s and the subsequent militarization of the region during the 1980s. Peace talks between the remaining active guerrilla groups and the government broke down in early 1992 and there has been a resultant increase in guerrilla activity and in the armed forces' counter-guerrilla operations. The government declared

a national state of emergency in November 1992. In areas where guerrilla forces are active, the local population is often perceived by the armed forces as potential guerrilla collaborators and has, as a result, been subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution. Particular targets have been community leaders, human rights workers and members of legal opposition parties. The Patriotic Union claim that more than 1,500 of its members have been the victims of politically motivated killings since its creation in 1985.

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RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters either in Spanish, English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of Alfonso Palacio, following reports that he has been the victim of death threats and harassment by members of the armed forces;
- urging that there be an immediate and thorough investigation into these reports, the results of which should be made public and those found responsible brought to justice;
- urging that all possible measures be taken to protect the lives of Alfonso Palacio and of all community leaders so that they can carry out their lawful activities without fear for their physical integrity.

APPEALS TO

1) Minister of Defence:

Dr. Rafael Pardo Rueda
Ministro de Defensa Nacional
Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
Avenida Eldorado - Carrera 52
Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa Pardo Rueda, Bogota, Colombia
Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO
Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874

Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

2) Advocate for the People:

Dr. Jaime Córdoba Triviño
Defensor del Pueblo
Defensoría del Pueblo
Avenida 39, No. 16-42
Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Defensor del Pueblo Trivino, Defensoria del Pueblo, Bogota, Colombia
Faxes: + 57 1 232 4640

Salutation: Estimado Dr Triviño/Dear Dr. Triviño

3) President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente César Gaviria Trujillo
Presidente de la República
Palacio de Nariño
Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: President Gaviria, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 44281 PALP CO
Faxes: + 57 1 286 7324/287 7937

Salutation:Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Gaviria

4) Procurator General:

Dr. Carlos Gustavo Arrieta Padilla
Procurador General de la Nación
Procuraduría General
Edificio Banco Ganadero
Carrera 5, No. 15-80
Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Procurador General Arrieta, Bogotá, Colombia

Faxes:+ 57 1 284 0472

Salutation:Sr. Procurador de la Nación/Dear Dr. Arrieta

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

Human Rights and Educational Organization

Señores

CINEP

AA 25916

Santa Fe de Bogotá

Colombia

and 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 23 July 1993.