

**COLOMBIA Members of peasant communities in Cauca department**

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Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of peasant farmer communities and social activists in the southwestern department of Cauca, where protesters have been participating in a strike and demonstrations since 16 September. Security forces in the area have reportedly restricted access to food, water and medical attention for peasant farmers participating in the strike.

Reports also suggest that tear-gas has been used against the demonstrators and that a large number of riot police have arrived in the area. Amnesty International is concerned that action taken by the security forces should not involve the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force against the demonstrators.

Demonstrations have been concentrated in areas to the north and south of the department: in an area known as La Fonda in the municipality of Patía to the south, and La María in the municipality of Piendamó to the north. Concern for those participating in the strike has been heightened by accusations made by senior government and security officials, labelling the national rural strike a guerrilla-organized protest. People previously labelled as guerrilla sympathizers or collaborators by the security forces or their paramilitary allies have frequently been the victim of serious human rights violations committed by paramilitary forces. There is also concern for the safety of numerous social organizations in the area, which have faced paramilitary death threats in advance of the strike.

Food and supplies have reportedly been restricted. For example, according to local sources, on 14 September two vehicles full of food destined for the more than 2000 peasants demonstrating in the La María area were seized by the police and some of their contents reportedly destroyed. Several people who were taken ill in La Fonda after drinking contaminated water were allegedly prohibited from travelling to a nearby hospital for medical attention. In the light of reports of a heavy paramilitary presence in the area, a short distance from army positions, Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of the protesters.

Over the last two years, Amnesty International has received information of death threats and killings by paramilitary forces who participated in previous rural strikes. Reports of paramilitary forces in the area, together with repeated reports received since 1999 of a large paramilitary presence in the department, despite the heavy presence of the security forces, raises concerns for the safety of the demonstrators.

According to reports, on 16 September at a meeting in which the Governor of Cauca, police and army officers, representatives of the human rights ombudsman, the regional procurator, and coordinators from the demonstrations were in attendance, a senior security force officer said that some of the demonstration leaders were members of extreme left-wing groups and that some peasant organizations were infiltrated by insurgent groups. This accusation followed a paramilitary death threat issued by the Bloque Calima, Calima Block of the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (ACCU), United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, on 7 September. The death threat, in the form of a communique to the media, was also received by several social organizations. This threat

has raised concerns for the safety of social organizations and trade unionists in Cauca Department, including those that are not participating in the strike.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

A national peasant demonstration began on 16 September. Rural peasant communities and agricultural communities have been mobilizing in protest at government agricultural policies, the influence of transnational corporations on Colombian agriculture, the destruction of national food sovereignty and the loss of biodiversity as well as the continued killing and "disappearance" of peasant farmers, and the forced displacement of peasant communities as a result of the armed conflict in Colombia.

The strike action in Cauca coincides with the continued build-up of paramilitary groups in the region, which have been able to operate in the department despite the strong presence of the security forces. Guerrilla forces have carried out numerous threats and killings of civilians they consider to be collaborating with their enemies, including death threats against mayors and other municipal officials.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of peasant farmers participating in the strike action;
- urging that the security forces should not take any action which places civilian population in danger, and calling for guarantees that the peasant farmers will have access to food, water and medical attention;
- expressing concern at the reported use of tear gas and excessive force against those attending the demonstrations;
- expressing concern for members of trade unions and social organizations, following the death threat issued by the ACCU on 7 September, urging that the authorities take all measures deemed appropriate by the threatened people themselves to guarantee their safety;
- urging that full and impartial investigations are undertaken into these death threats and those responsible to be brought to justice and the results to be made public;
- urging full and impartial investigations into possible links between the security forces and paramilitaries in the department of Cauca that the results are made public and that those members of the security forces responsible for operating in unison with paramilitary forces or supporting them are brought to justice;
- expressing concern at the continued large-scale presence of paramilitary forces in Cauca despite the heavy military presence in the department and urging immediate decisive action to confront and dismantle these groups, in line with repeated UN recommendations and governmental commitments.

#### **APPEALS TO:**

President of the Republic  
 Señor Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez  
 Presidente de la República  
 Palacio de Nariño  
 Carrera 8 No.7-26  
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegram: Presidente de la República, Bogotá, Colombia**

**Fax: + 57 1 342 0592**

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

Minister of Defence

Dra. Martha Lucía Ramírez

Ministra de Defensa Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional  
Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia**Telegram: Ministra de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia****Telex: 42411 INPRE CO / 44561 CFAC CO****Fax: + 57 1 221 1674** Dear Minister Ramírez / Sra. Ministra RamírezMinister of the Interior and Justice

Dr. Fernando Londoño Hoyos

Ministro del Interior y Justicia, Ministerio del Interior y Justicia,  
Palacio Echeverry, Carrera 8a, No.8-09, piso 2o.,  
Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA**Telegram: Ministro del Interior, Bogotá, Colombia****Fax: + 57 1 566 4573****Salutation: Dear Dr. Londoño Hoyos / Sr. Ministro Londoño Hoyos****COPIES TO:**National Advocate for the peopleSr. Eduardo Cifuentes Muñoz, Defensor del Pueblo, Defensoría del Pueblo,  
Calle 55, No. 10-32/46 office 301,  
Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA**National Advocate, Bogotá, Colombia****Fax: + 57 1 640 0491****Salutation: Dear Mr. Cifuentes Muñoz / Estimado Sr. Cifuentes Muñoz**

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 1 November 2002.