

EXTERNAL

AI Index: 44/09/97

UA 238/97

Fear for safety/ Extrajudicial Execution/
Possible disappearances

28 July 1997

~~IAAC/COFA~~

José Ignacio Acevedo
Marcos Torres
Román Antonio Zapata
Cipriano García

And members of the Regional Association for forced
migrations (ARMIF) *Asociación Regional para las Migraciones Forzadas* and the
Alternative Legal Office of Panama (*Asistencia Legal Alternativa de Panamá*)

Amnesty International is seriously concerned at the failure of the Panamanian Government to guarantee the safety of Colombian refugees living close to the border with Colombia and also of the local population who have been helping them. This follows reports of continuing incursions into Panama by members of Colombian paramilitary forces which have resulted in the possible extrajudicial executions of at least two people, the "disappearance" of two others and threats to the local population.

On 24 June 1997, at least 100 alleged members of the Colombian paramilitary group known as *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU) the Peasant Farmers Self-Defence Groups of Córdoba and Urabá entered the community of Yapé, Pinogana District in the Province of Darién. According to reports, they killed José Ignacio Acevedo and abducted Marcos Torres and Román Antonio Zapata whose whereabouts remain unknown. They are also reported to have threatened the community for the help they had given to Colombian refugees. Paramilitary groups, operating with the support and under the coordination of the Colombian Army, have often labelled those displaced by the conflict in Colombia as guerrilla sympathizers. These accusations have often been followed by serious human rights violations.

On 6 July 1997, Cipriano García, a Panamanian citizen was found dead. He had been abducted from the community of Yaviza a few days before. Local witnesses reported that they had seen armed men in the area. They were later identified as being from Colombian paramilitary groups. Graffiti left on the walls of the church, the school and houses indicated the presence of Colombian paramilitary groups.

Amnesty International is also seriously concerned at recent statements, by the Panamanian Government and the security forces, seeking to discredit the work of local human rights groups who have been providing legal and humanitarian assistance to Colombian refugees. On 13 July, the director of the National Police [*director de la Policía Nacional*] José Luis Sosa and the head of the National Security Council [*Consejo Nacional de Seguridad*] Gabriel Castro were quoted in *La Prensa* daily newspaper as saying: "*estos grupos de derechos humanos, ligados a la Coordinadora Popular para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, evidentemente apoyan la guerrilla colombiana y por eso culpan de los atropellos a los paramilitares*", "these human rights groups, linked to the Popular Movement for the Defence of Human Rights obviously support the Colombian guerrillas and that is why they are blaming these attacks on the paramilitaries". In addition, Raúl Montenegro, Minister of Government and Justice [*Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia*] said: "*las organizaciones no gubernamentales que realizan misiones humanitarias en el área, son grupos alarmistas que viven del problema y lo que buscan es atemorizar a la población*", "the non-governmental organizations who are carrying out humanitarian efforts

in the area are alarmists and live off the problem and are seeking to terrorize the population".

Such statements seriously undermine the work of these human rights groups and place them at risk.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the last year, hundreds of people from the Urabá region of Colombia have sought refuge in Panama in the wake of large-scale paramilitary/army offensives and abuses of international humanitarian law by armed opposition groups. In spite of intervention by the international community and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), several hundred refugees were forcibly repatriated by the Panamanian authorities in clear breach of its international human rights obligations under the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, article 33.1 which states, "No contracting state shall expel or return a refugee (*refouler*) in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion".

Colombian paramilitaries have crossed the border on several occasions and committed human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, against Colombian refugees and Panamanian citizens.

(For further information, please refer to the report, Panama/Colombia -Refugees: The right to escape from death -AI Index: AMR 44/06/97 and Extra 50/97, 14 April 1997 and follow-ups to this dated 21 April 1997 and 8 May 1997.

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

To Panamanian Authorities

- expressing concern at these latest incursions by Colombian paramilitary groups and urging the Panamanian government to take all measures necessary to guarantee the safety of the communities and Colombian refugees living in the border areas;
- expressing serious concern at reported statements by government officials which discredit the work of legitimate human rights groups providing assistance to Colombian refugees and urging the government to guarantee the safety of all human rights monitors working with the refugees.

To Colombian Authorities

- expressing grave concern at the latest incursion by paramilitary groups into Panamanian territory and calling on the Colombian authorities to investigate the incident thoroughly;
- urging that full and impartial investigations be undertaken into the links between the Colombian security forces and paramilitary groups and that members of the security forces collaborating with paramilitary groups be brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to dismantle all paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments.

APPEALS TO:

- 1) President of the Republic, Panama

S.E. Ernesto Pérez Balladares
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio Presidencial
 Valija 50, Panamá 1, REPUBLICA DE PANAMA
Telegrams: Presidente Balladares, Panamá
Telexes: 2770 PRESIPA PG
Faxes: + 507 2 27-6818
Salutation: Sr. Presidente/Dear President

2) Minister of Government and Justice, Panama
 Sr. Raúl Montenegro
 Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia
 Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia
 Apartado 1628, Panamá 1, REPUBLICA DE PANAMA
Telegrams: Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia, Panamá
Telexes: 2746
Faxes: + 507 2 12-0372
Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister

3) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Panama
 Sr. Gabriel Lewis Galindo
 Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores
 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores
 C. 34 Plaza Porras, Panamá 4, REPUBLICA DE PANAMA
Telegrams: Ministro de relaciones Exteriores, Panamá
Telex: 2771 EXTPAN PG
Faxes: + 507 2 11-0416
Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister

President of Colombia:
 Señor Presidente Ernesto Samper Pizano
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
 carrera 8 No. 7-26
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: President Samper Pizano, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 44281 PALP CO
Faxes: + 57 1 284 2186/57 1 286 3782/57 1 289 3377/57 1 286 7434
E.Mail: esamper@presidencia.gov.co
Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/ Dear President Samper

Minister of the Interior, Colombia:
 Dr. Carlos Holmes Trujillo García
 Ministro del Interior
 Ministerio del Interior
 Carrera 8, No.8-09, Piso 2
 Santafé de Bogotá
 COLOMBIA
Telegrams: Ministro del Interior, Bogota, Colombia
Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO
Faxes: + 57 1 286 6524/57 1 281 5884/57 1 284 0214/57 1 286 0053
Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

1) Human Rights Organization

Srs Centro de Investigación de los Derechos Humanos y Socorro Jurídico de Panamá
Apartado Postal 10215, Panamá 4, PANAMA

2) Human Rights Organization

Sres Asociación Regional para Las Migraciones Forzadas
Apartado 862 -C.P. 2050 San Pedro de Montes de Oca
San José, Costa Rica
Fax: +506 255 0733

and to diplomatic representatives of Panama accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 8 September 1997.