

Colombia: Close the laboratory of war

The department of Arauca is on the front line of Colombia's human rights crisis. It is rich in natural resources and lies next to the Venezuelan border. The region is therefore economically and militarily strategic to all the parties in Colombia's armed conflict – the security forces, operating in alliance with paramilitary groups, and guerrilla forces. These groups are fighting an intense and escalating conflict for control of the region. It is a battle in which the people of the department have come under attack from all sides.

The country's armed forces and their paramilitary allies are waging a vicious campaign of harassment and intimidation in the department, with the apparent aim of "cleansing" it of any perceived threat to the country's economic interests, in particular oil supplies. As a result, paramilitaries have killed and "disappeared" hundreds of people. Human rights defenders, trade unionists, peasant leaders and social activists have been singled out for attack, as the security forces and their paramilitary allies seek to prevent them from speaking out about the country's continued appalling human rights record and to silence their campaigns for socio-economic rights. These sectors have been regularly labelled subversives by the security forces and paramilitaries - accusations which have frequently been followed by serious human rights violations.

Over the last two years, human rights defenders, trade unionists, peasant leaders and social activists, have also faced arbitrary detentions and raids of their offices and homes by the security forces who have often relied on spurious allegations or the evidence provided by paid or military informers to initiate arbitrary legal proceedings against these sectors. Many of these detentions have been undertaken by the Support Structure (*Estructura de Apoyo*), a joint body incorporating the security forces and judicial investigators and based at the army barracks in the city of Arauca. These proceedings often coincide with paramilitary death threats and killings and Amnesty International is witnessing a combined military-paramilitary strategy to discredit and physically eliminate human rights organizations in Arauca. Peasant farmers and indigenous communities living in conflict zones and areas of economic interest have also faced serious human rights violations.

Meanwhile, many people are also being killed, injured and threatened by guerrilla groups who accuse them of siding with their enemies. Some are local state officials singled out for attack; others are civilians killed and maimed by low-precision bombs and mortars fired at military targets.

The international community is turning a blind eye to these abuses. One country, the USA, is even abetting them through its support of military units operating in the region. This indifference must stop. The people of Arauca must be protected.

Write to the President of Colombia with the message that real security is only possible when human rights are respected. Act now.

Sample letter

Dear President Álvaro Uribe

The people of Arauca department are suffering. Hundreds have been killed, tortured or have "disappeared, some of them at the hands of your security forces, and many others by army-backed paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. Many more - human rights defenders, peasant leaders and social activists - have been intimidated into silence, in an attempt to prevent them challenging [public statements by your government that Colombia's](#) human rights record is improving.

While I recognise that guerrilla groups too have been responsible for many abuses, such as the killing of local political leaders and of civilians in bomb or mortar attacks, I believe that your government's security policies in Arauca have only worsened the situation.

I urge you to take effective measures to guarantee the safety of civilian communities, in particular those vulnerable sectors of civilian society including human rights defenders, social activists including peasant farmer activists and trade unionists, as well as displaced peasant farmers and Guahibo indigenous communities of the municipality of Tame.

I urge your government to ensure that decisive action is taken to guarantee the safety of the civilian population in Arauca and to ensure that the Office of the Attorney General undertakes full and impartial investigations into human rights abuses committed by guerrilla forces and violations committed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies, that the results are made public and that those responsible are brought to justice

I ask you to launch immediate judicial investigations into the cases of people arbitrarily detained by the security forces, and to seek the advice of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) regarding the organization and structure of these investigations, and to ensure international law standards are upheld.

I also urge that you urgently invite the UN Working Group on arbitrary detentions to work alongside the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights in your country to monitor and follow-up the cases of mass arrests and detentions, arrests undertaken by the *Estructura de Apoyo* -and other possibly arbitrary proceedings coordinated by the security forces covered by these judicial investigations.

Yours

Address

President of the Republic of Colombia
Presidente de la República de Colombia
Dr. Álvaro Uribe Vélez
Palacio de Nariño
Carrera 8 No.7-26
Bogotá,
COLOMBIA
Fax: +57 1 342 0592
Salutation: Exmo. Sr Presidente

If you are interested in finding out more about the situation in Arauca, please refer to AI's report: Colombia: Laboratory of War: Repression and Violence in Arauca, April 2004 (AI Index: AMR 23/004/2004). If you are interested in taking further and more detailed action on the situation in Arauca, please contact the AI section in your country for contact details on national structures working on Colombia.