

COLOMBIA Activists with the *Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)*, Popular Womens' Organization

Amnesty International fears for the safety of activists belonging to a women's grass roots organization, who have been threatened by paramilitaries after they refused to cooperate with them.

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 over whoever stands in their way" (*se tomarían la casa "tumbando la puerta y pasando por encima de quien fuera"*).

Although he was arrested by the police, who had been called to the centre, it is feared that the AUC will carry out their threat and take the centre by force given that there has been an increased presence of paramilitary forces in 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 able to operate unhindered, and are reported to have set up checkpoints and to have killed several people in recent weeks.

The *Casa de la Mujer de la OFP* is an internationally-backed project established by the Catholic church in 1972. It works with displaced communities in the Magdalena Medio region and provides economic help, food, education and women's health initiatives. 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 OFP activists following previous threats against their lives by army-backed paramilitary (see UA 133/00, AMR 23/038/00, 25 May 2000).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1998, a paramilitary raid on Barrancabermeja, during which seven people were killed and 25 "disappeared", drew international condemnation (see *Barrancabermeja: A City under Siege*, AI Index: AMR 23/36/99, May 1999). The United Nations has repeatedly recommended that the Colombian government take action to combat and dismantle paramilitary groups. However, the authorities have failed to take effective action against either the paramilitary groups operating in the region, or the elements within the security forces who collaborate with them. On the contrary, members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity and this year alone, the United Nations Human Rights Office in Colombia has received information about 26 massacres,

in which more than 170 people have been killed, most of them by paramilitary groups.

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

- urging the Colombian authorities to take appropriate measures to guarantee the safety of members of the *Organización Femenina Popular* so they can continue their legitimate work for the defence and promotion of human rights;
- calling for an immediate, impartial and full investigation into the paramilitary threats of 27 January, and for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- urging the Colombian government to adhere to its obligations regarding human rights defenders as laid out in UN and OAS declarations, and in line with repeated recommendations made by the UN to the Colombian government to take measures to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders;
- expressing concern that the government has taken no effective action against paramilitary groups in the Barrancabermeja area, despite their own commitments and UN recommendations to combat and dismantle these groups;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the department of Santander, urging that the results are made public, and that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana Arango
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
 Carrera 8 No.7-26
 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Fax: + 57 1 336 2109 / 337 1351

Salutation: Dear President / Excmo. Sr. Presidente

Vice-President of the Republic

Señor Vicepresidente Gustavo Bell Lemus
 Alto Consejero Presidencial para asuntos de Derechos Humanos y lucha Contra la Corrupción
 Cra. 8 #7-26, Palacio de Nariño,
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Faxes: + 57 1 337 1350 / 337 1351

Salutation: Excmo. Sr. Vicepresidente / Dear Vice-President

Minister of Defence

Dr. Luis Fernando Ramírez Acuña
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegram: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

Telex: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO

Fax: + 57 1 222 1874

Salutation: Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro

Governor of Santander Department

Gobernador del Departamento de Santander

Sr. Jorge Eliecer Gómez Villamizar
Gobernación de Santander
Calle 37, No. 10-30
Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia

Faxes: +57 76 339889

Salutation: Dear Governor / Sr. Gobernador

COPIES TO:

Women's grassroots organization
Organización Femenina Popular
Cra 22 No 52B - 36
Barrancabermeja, Santander, 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 12 March 2001.