

UA 52/01

Fear for Safety

9 March 2001

COLOMBIA

Peace Community of San José de Apartadó

Gunmen, thought to be army-backed paramilitaries, attacked the "Peace Community" of San José de Apartadó on 5 March, setting fire to houses and threatening to kill the inhabitants and members of an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) who were with them. More attacks are believed to be imminent.

The gunmen apparently came into the community from an area that a patrol of the Colombian Army's XVII Brigade (*Brigada XVII*) had just left. Soldiers from this brigade have recently been seen patrolling with known paramilitaries, and have reportedly threatened people living in San José de Apartadó. Members of Peace Brigades International (PBI), who are present in the community to provide protection, had been told by the XVII Brigade not to travel to San José de Apartadó between 5 and 11 March, raising fears that further attacks are planned.

At least 10 gunmen reportedly went into the community, which is in the municipality of Apartadó, Antioquia department, at 7:55pm. Four of the gunmen went into one building, where they threatened two PBI members, a worker from another international agency and religious workers, saying they would be killed if they raised the alarm. When they told the gunmen to respect the civilian population, the gunmen replied that this was a military operation and they had orders "*de acabar con esta mierda*", "to finish off this shit". The gunmen then destroyed two telephones to prevent them raising the alarm.

The gunmen wanted to know where the community's leaders were, and also demanded: "Tell me where the money is. We are going to burn all this down. Tell us where the money is or we'll burn all this shit". ("*Díganme dónde está la plata? Vamos a prender todo esto. O nos dicen dónde está la plata o vamos a incendiar esta mierda*"). When one of the NGO workers again called for respect for the security of the civilian population he was told: "*Si no se calla, lo mato*", "If you don't shut up I'll kill you".

As they left, the gunmen reportedly warned them: "As from tomorrow this has to be abandoned, this must be a ghost town. We're going to burn everything down. Next time we will not respect anybody, not even women and children." ("*Esto desde mañana debe estar desocupado, tiene que ser un pueblo fantasma. Vamos a incendiar todo. Todo el mundo tiene que largarse de aquí. La próxima vez no respetamos a nadie ni a mujeres ni a niños*".) They reportedly then tried to burn the building down. Other gunmen had forced their way into 20 houses and set fire to at least 13 of them, reportedly stealing the families' possessions.

Soldiers arrived at 8:45pm, 25 minutes after the gunmen left, and stayed until shortly after midnight. They made no attempt to pursue the gunmen.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The community of San José de Apartadó is made up of around 1,000 people who were forced to leave their homes in the Urabá region of north-western Colombia in 1996 and 1997 by massacres committed by army-backed paramilitary groups and guerrilla organizations. In March 1997 they declared themselves a *Comunidad de Paz* ("Peace Community"), in an attempt to persuade the warring factions to respect their right as civilians not to be drawn into the conflict, and their right to life. More than 70 have since "disappeared" or been killed, the majority by army-backed paramilitary groups, others by soldiers or the armed opposition group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Neither side accepts the community's right to neutrality. (See *Colombia: Return to Hope*, AMR 23/23/00, June 2000 for more details). Senior armed forces commanders and political leaders have repeatedly accused the community of being guerrilla sympathizers, because they refuse to allow any armed group, including the army, to maintain a presence

there. These accusations have frequently been followed by serious human rights violations committed by the security forces or their paramilitary allies.

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

- expressing concern that gunmen attacked the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, in Urabá, on 5 March, and asking the authorities to order a full and impartial investigation;
- urging the authorities to give protection to San José de Apartadó, following the wishes of the people who live there;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the XVII Brigade and paramilitary groups in the department of Antioquia, for the results to be made public and for those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups to be brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate and decisive action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with repeated government commitments and UN recommendations.

Please also urge your own government to publicly condemn this attack and to monitor the efforts of the Colombian government to ensure that this attack is fully investigated, those responsible are brought to justice and action is taken to combat paramilitary groups in the region. In the past year delegations from a number of governments have expressed support for the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó and other Peace Communities in the departments of Antioquia and Chocó, and have travelled to these communities or met with their representatives.

APPEALS TO:

President of Colombia

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

Telegrams: President Pastrana, Bogotá, Colombia

Telex: 44281 PALP CO

Fax: + 57 1 286 7434/284 2186/337 1351

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Pastrana

Minister of the Interior

Dr Armando Estrada Villa

Ministro del Interior, Ministerio del Interior, Palacio Echeverry
Carrera 8a, No.8-09, piso 2o., Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Ministro Interior, Bogota, Colombia

Fax: + 57 1 341 9583 / 334 3960

Salutation: Dear Sir / Sr. Ministro

Commander of the Armed Forces

General Fernando Tapias Stahelin

Comandante de las Fuerzas Militares

Avenida El Dorado - Carrera 52

Santafé de Bogotá

Colombia

Telegrams: Comandante Fuerzas Militares, Bogota, Colombia

Fax: + 57 1 222 2096

Salutation: Sr. Comandante/Dear Commander

Governor of the Department of Antioquia

Dr. Alberto Builes Ortega, Gobernador del Departamento de Antioquia

Gobernación de Antioquia, Calle 42B, # 52-106, Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia

Telegrams: Gobernador de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia

Fax: + 574 381 1342

Salutation: Sr. Gobernador / Dear Governor

COPIES TO:

Intercongregational Commission for Justice and Peace

Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz

AA 31861

Santafé 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 20 April 2001.