

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 23/38/00

UA 133/00

Fear for

COLOMBIA Women's organization activists and trade union leaders in the Magdalena Medio region

Paramilitary groups have threatened to kill women's organization activists and trade union leaders who have refused to cooperate with them in the oil-producing Magdalena Medio region of Colombia.

The army are due to withdraw from the region in preparation for peace negotiations with the armed opposition group *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), the National Liberation Army. For some months paramilitary groups have reportedly been forcing local people to take part in mass 'protests' against the withdrawal of the army.

On 22 May a group of men who said they were members of the *Autodefensas* (self defence - a name used by paramilitaries) asked to borrow cooking equipment for use on one of these 'protests' from a women's grass-roots organization in Puerto Wilches, Santander, the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP). The women refused, and the men returned after half an hour threatening that "*mañana a las 8 de la mañana venimos a llevar lo que necesitamos porque nosotros mandamos en Puerto Wilches. Si no lo entrega se lo cobramos a la coordinadora*" ("tomorrow at 8am we will come to collect what we need, because we give the orders in Puerto Wilches. If you don't hand it over, your leader will pay for it.')

The OFP immediately lodged an official complaint with the authorities. The following day they received a warning to withdraw the complaint or "take the consequences". ("*que se levantara la denuncia que se colocó ante las autoridades competentes del municipio...aténganse a las consecuencias*").

Since these threats some 50 OFP members and their families have sought refuge from the paramilitaries in the OFP centre in Puerto Wilches.

Leaders of the principal oil workers' trade union in Yondó, Antioquia, the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO), have also been threatened by paramilitary groups in recent weeks. The paramilitaries have said they consider USO leaders to be military targets ("*objetivo militar*").

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Paramilitary groups backed by the army routinely label human rights defenders, trade unionists and grass-roots organizations as guerrilla collaborators or supporters, so they can present them as legitimate targets for attack. These groups have killed several thousand civilians over the past five years, and continue to operate with virtual impunity. Some of the armed opposition groups that the army and the paramilitaries are fighting have also refused to recognise the legitimacy of human rights and other civil society organisations.

The Colombian government suspended the constitutional legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the armed forces to combat and disband such groups in 1989, yet they continue to work with the support of the security forces in many areas of the country.

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* and the *Unión Sindical*

Obrera and to enable them to continue their legitimate work for the defence and promotion of human rights;

- calling for an immediate, impartial and full investigation into these threats 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 the UN *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* adopted on 9 December 1998, the Organization of American States *Human Rights Defenders in the Americas* resolution adopted on 7 June 1999 [AG/RES. 1671 (XXIX-O/99)] 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;

- urging the authorities to take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments and UN recommendations.

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 1 286 7434/287 7939/284 2186/337 1351

Salutation: 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

Fax: + 57 1 3371351

Salutation: Excmo. Sr. Vicepresidente

Minister of Defence

Dr. Luis Fernando Ramirez

Ministro de Defensa Nacional

Ministerio de Defensa Nacional

Avenida Eldorado - Carrera 52

Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Fax: + 57 222 1874/221 3653/288 4906

Salutation: Sr. Ministro

Comander of the 5th Brigade of the Colombian Armed Forces

General Martín Orlando Carreño Sandoval

Calle 14, Carrera 33

Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia

Fax: + 57 76 455051 / 76 351493

Salutation: Sr. General

COPIES TO:

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 7 July 2000.