

CAPTIONS

The wife and children of indigenous leader César Aquite, who was murdered by a "death squad". Killings of "social undesirables" are endemic in Colombian cities © Joe Fish

Blanca Cecilia Valero de Durán, secretary of CREDHOS, an independent human rights organization, who was killed in January 1992

Widows of Arhuaco indigenous leaders murdered by the Colombian army

Three members of ASFADDES: Carmenza Vélez, Gladys Luz Gómez and Yanette Bautista

Diana Cardona Saldarriaga, UP mayoress of Apartadó in the Antioquia department, who was abducted from her home and killed by paramilitaries in 1990

María Mercedes Méndez, former UP mayoress of El Castillo in Meta department, who was killed by paramilitaries in 1992 together with four others, including Rosa Peña Rodríguez, the municipal treasurer © ASCODAS

Four daughters of María Mercedes Méndez © ASCODAS

Human rights defenders Luz Marina Pérez and her husband Cristóbal Navarro, paralysed from the waist down by gunmen in February 1994

Widows whose husbands were killed in a series of massacres in Trujillo department of Valle del Cauca in which 107 people were murdered by the army and paramilitary in 1990

A displaced family in a shelter in Barrancabermeja © Jenny Matthews

Young prostitutes in Bogotá standing under a "death squad" poster inviting "criminals" to their own funerals

ENDNOTES

¹ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women CEDAW/C/COL/2-3, April 1993.

² Art. 43, Political Constitution of Colombia, 1991

³ Op. cit.

⁴ A division of the Colombian Public Ministry, an autonomous body headed by the Procurator General. It has a constitutional responsibility to investigate state agents accused of misconduct and to bring disciplinary proceedings and apply sanctions where appropriate.

⁵ Specialist counter-insurgency brigades of the Colombian armed forces.

⁶ Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr Francis Deng. Profiles in displacement: Colombia, E/CN.4/1995/50/Add.1, October 1994.

⁷ Interview with a representative of Peace Brigades International, March 1995.

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women in Colombia is pervasive. In 1993 the Colombian Government reported to the United Nations (UN) that:

"Violence is the chief cause of death in the group of women between 15 and 44 and the eleventh cause of death among women of all ages. The impact of violence on the family group is reflected in the notable increase in the proportion of women widowed, and children, particularly at the youngest ages, orphaned as the result of violence. Increasingly, women are affected directly".¹

While domestic and sexual violence accounts for the majority of cases of violence against women, in recent years women have increasingly been victims of politically motivated violence and human rights violations including rape, torture and extrajudicial executions.

Colombia's appallingly high level of serious violations has taken place against a backdrop of violent political conflict between armed opposition groups and the state.

The Colombian armed forces' response to the guerrilla insurgency has been characterized by gross and systematic violations of human rights against real or perceived opponents. Paramilitary groups created

by the armed forces to act as auxiliaries in counter-insurgency operations have committed widespread atrocities in many areas of the country, including massacres which have left thousands of people, many of them women, dead. In 1989, in response to a growing public outcry, paramilitary groups were declared illegal, but this measure was not backed up by effective action to disband them. Consequently, they continue to carry out widespread human rights violations with the support of — and often in collaboration with — the armed forces.

The majority of victims of these human rights violations have been peasant farmers living in areas of guerrilla presence. Community leaders, trade unionists, judges, teachers, Indian leaders and human rights activists have all been among the victims. Thousands more have been tortured and many hundreds have "disappeared" after arrest. These acts have been committed with almost total impunity.

Guerrilla groups active in Colombia have contributed to the spiral of violence with persistent violations of the principles of international humanitarian law. The largest guerrilla organization, with an estimated 7,000 combatants, is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Other armed groups with left-wing political programs include the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). Abuses for which they have been held responsible include kidnapping and holding hundreds of civilians hostage and the deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians not party to the conflict, as well as members of the armed forces who are hors de combat.

Throughout this conflict, women have been the victims of human rights abuses for a variety of reasons: some because they are themselves politically active; others because of the political activity of their partners or relatives; and others simply because they live in areas where guerrilla forces are active and are automatically considered by the armed forces to be guerrilla sympathizers or supporters.

The Constitution of 1991 guarantees extensive civil rights for women, including the right to equality of opportunity and the right not to be subjected to any form of discrimination.² It stipulates that every citizen has the right to participate in the establishment, exercise and control of political power and that the authorities will guarantee the appropriate and effective participation of women at decision-making levels of public administration, giving special protection to those who, owing to their economic, physical or mental condition, are in a position of manifest weakness. It also stipulates that acts of abuse and ill-treatment committed against women shall be punished.

But despite the constitutional provisions, discrimination and violence against Colombian women persist, and women's participation in the national political structures and institutions in Colombia is low.

However, women are increasingly taking active roles in grassroots political movements, local community organizations such as housing, health and educational projects and in women's non-governmental organizations, which aim at improving living conditions. Women have also begun to organize at local and regional levels to call for an end to the civil conflict. Three hundred women from the conflict-torn Magdalena Medio region, for example, met in June 1995 and called for guerrilla organizations and paramilitary forces to strive for reconciliation, respect for the right to life, and peace in the region.

According to the Colombian Government:

"Women are local leaders, they stimulate the activities of the suburb, convene group meetings, carry out fund-raising activities, approach the governmental authorities in order to call for solutions to their problems of a general nature and are elected to community organizations. However, very few women are elected to higher-ranking and representative posts."³

2. PERSECUTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Members of human rights organizations have come under increasing attack in Colombia in recent years. Human rights violations against human rights defenders have included threats, harassment and in some cases "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution. The majority of attacks have been attributed to paramilitary organizations operating under the command of the Colombian armed forces. In several cases, however, there is strong evidence that members of the Colombian armed forces have been directly responsible for abuses, including extrajudicial executions, committed against human rights defenders.

2.1 Harassment, death threats and killings

The Barrancabermeja-based Regional Human Rights Committee (CREDHOS) is in one of the areas in Colombia where human rights violations have been particularly widespread. For several years the organization has monitored and denounced human rights violations by the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary groups, as well as abuses by armed opposition groups in the Magdalena Medio region. It also offers support to the victims of human rights violations and their relatives.

All those who join CREDHOS know only too well the risks they face. Staff members, many of whom are women, continually receive threats, and these are sometimes carried out. Since its foundation, six CREDHOS members have been killed, two of them women, and three have had to leave the country.

Blanca Cecilia Valero de Durán, a mother of three children, was the secretary of CREDHOS and continued her work for many years despite constant intimidation. At 6.30pm on 29 January 1992 she left the CREDHOS office and was shot at point-blank range by two men in civilian clothes. She died almost instantly. According to witnesses, three policemen watched the attack without attempting to intervene. They did not try to catch the assassins, who escaped and have never been caught.

Only months after the murder of Blanca Cecilia Valero, another CREDHOS member, Julio Berrio, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in Barrancabermeja. A month later, Ligia Patricia Cortez, who worked on a CREDHOS-backed educational project, was shot dead together with two trade unionists in a restaurant in Barrancabermeja.

In early January 1994 a Colombian daily newspaper reported that two naval officials had testified to the Attorney General about their assignment in 1991 to a secret Navy Intelligence Unit, identified as Network 7, which operated under the direct command of the National Director of Naval Intelligence. The officials described how the unit had assassinated about a hundred trade unionists, teachers, journalists and human rights workers, including Blanca Cecilia Valero, Julio Berrio and Ligia Patricia Cortez, in the city of Barrancabermeja and throughout the Magdalena Medio region. In August 1994 the Special Investigations Unit of the Procurator General's office⁴ recommended formal disciplinary proceedings against the National Director of Naval Intelligence for having failed to control the activities of the unit. However, judicial investigations into its activities have been passed to the military justice system, which has consistently failed to convict members of the armed forces involved in human rights violations.

In June 1995 CREDHOS informed Amnesty International of a renewed spate of telephone death threats against its members following the publication of a CREDHOS report documenting serious human rights violations by the armed forces and paramilitary groups in the Magdalena Medio region. Anonymous male callers told CREDHOS members of staff:

"You don't speak out when one of us is killed, but we are going to make you speak out, son-of-a-bitch bandits"... "You know you smell of formaldehyde, we know all your movements so take care of yourselves, guerrillas"... "Your time is coming to an end"... "We are keeping you under constant watch, we know that you go around with people who are looking after you, but one day you are going to fall." Several women members of CREDHOS, including its president Osiris Bayther Feriaz, have been repeatedly subjected to harassment in recent months. Unmarked cars have been noted following their movements and unidentified armed men have been seen observing the CREDHOS office and taking photographs of the human rights workers.

Lourdes Castro, a young lawyer, left Colombia in 1994 after being subjected to a campaign of intimidation by the security forces because of her work in defence of human rights. In an interview with Amnesty International she said:

"I first got interested in human rights in the last years of high school, because we went out from school into the countryside to work with the campesinos (the poor peasant farmers) particularly around the coal mining area near Bogotá, where I am from. I saw how hard the living and the working conditions were and it motivated me to go off and study law at university. I wanted to be able to use my new profession to defend the rights of these people, whom I had seen at close hand. The thesis of my law degree was about enforced "disappearance" and impunity in Colombia.

"At the moment I am part of a very new non-governmental human rights organization called MINGA, which has eight professional staff: three lawyers, two teachers, two journalists and a social worker. We work principally in regions affected by the armed conflict, with two main areas of work: popular education with grassroots human rights movements and legal assistance for victims of human rights violations and the defence of political prisoners."

In 1993 Lourdes Castro became the defence lawyer for Francisco Galán, a captured leader of the ELN guerrilla organization. She denounced numerous irregularities in his conditions of detention, including his isolation in a military installation and torture immediately after his arrest. Because of this, Lourdes Castro faced repeated verbal abuse from military personnel whenever she visited her client. Remarks included: "If you are Galán's lawyer, then you must share the same ideology". She says:

"I was subjected to accusations and harassment from the armed forces and intelligence services. I was threatened and followed; hidden microphones were installed in the prison cell where I talked to my client. In these hostile conditions I left the country, believing I would be able to return quite soon."

Lourdes Castro has still not been able to return to Colombia.

Nancy Fiallo Araque, a human rights educator, has worked for over four years with the Foundation for the Promotion of Culture and Popular Education (FUNPROCEP) in the city of Bucaramanga, Santander department. This is an area of long-standing civil conflict where human rights violations by the armed forces and paramilitary groups are widespread and guerrilla organizations operating in the region commit frequent abuses of international humanitarian law. The work of the human rights department of FUNPROCEP has increasingly centred on supporting relatives of victims of extrajudicial executions, "disappearances" and torture, to present complaints and to seek redress from the competent authorities.

The work of Nancy Fiallo has brought her into frequent contact with the local civilian and military authorities in her role as representative and adviser to the victims. Since 1992 she received anonymous telephone calls threatening her with death unless she abandoned her work. In July that year she escaped an apparent attempt by a group of armed men to abduct her.

In late 1994, the anonymous threats against Nancy Fiallo increased significantly both at the office of FUNPROCEP and at her home. In early 1995 she left Bucaramanga and her work because of the threat to her security.

2.2 Relatives of victims

Relatives of victims of human rights violations also face a serious risk of reprisal if they push for investigations and for those responsible to be brought to justice. In many cases relatives decide not to make complaints or testify because they feel that they are too vulnerable to acts of reprisal. On numerous occasions relatives of victims have been threatened or even killed if they persisted with their struggle for justice.

In 1982 a group of relatives of the "disappeared" formed an organization to provide legal assistance and support for people like themselves. It campaigns ceaselessly for investigations into individual cases and for legal reforms to end impunity. The vast majority of members of this organization, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared (ASFADDES) are women whose husbands, fathers, sons or daughters have "disappeared" after detention by the security forces or their paramilitary auxiliaries. Many women abandon the routine of their lives and become activists, denouncing the human rights violations and demanding justice. In the case of relatives of the "disappeared", the struggle to establish the whereabouts of their loved ones can continue for many years.

One member of ASFADDES said:

"My boyfriend 'disappeared'. We had a little girl. Being a relative of a 'disappeared' person means above all emptiness; emptiness in the heart, emptiness in the home, in your day-to-day life. It means remembering every day. It also means being a person isolated from society, in a special category, because for most people 'disappearance' does not exist... But life must go on — not only for oneself but for the children. Even so, psychological problems persist. I know that when a relative comes to ASFADDES and tells us her case, we have all lived the same experience. It means going back over and reliving it all again. It is like a piece of the past which keeps returning over and over and we cannot forget."

The courageous efforts of relatives to establish the whereabouts of their loved ones and to bring the perpetrators to justice has led to a systematic pattern of harassment and intimidation of members of ASFADDES. One member, Fabiola Lalinde, and her son, Jorge, were arrested by soldiers from the Bomboná battalion of Medellín, Antioquia department, in October 1988. Fabiola Lalinde had joined the organization when another son, Luis Fernando Lalinde, "disappeared" in October 1984 after being detained by the army. Witnesses to his arrest had testified at a judicial investigation that they had seen him being tortured by soldiers at the time of his arrest. Despite strong prima facie evidence of the

armed forces' responsibility for his "disappearance", military authorities persistently denied all knowledge of his whereabouts.

Fabiola Lalinde actively campaigned for her son's whereabouts to be made known and for those responsible to be brought to justice. She was arrested after soldiers searching her house alleged they had found drugs in Luis Fernando's bedroom. Fabiola Lalinde denied all knowledge of the drugs, which she claimed had been "planted" by army personnel in reprisal for her insistence in pursuing the alleged responsibility of the armed forces for her son's "disappearance".

Only weeks before her arrest, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States had issued a resolution condemning the Colombian Government for violation of Articles 4 and 7 of the American Convention of Human Rights for the arrest and subsequent "disappearance" of Luis Fernando Lalinde. Following an international outcry, Fabiola Lalinde and her son Jorge were released in November 1988 and the charges against them were eventually dropped.

Although a body believed to be that of Luis Fernando Lalinde was discovered in 1992 buried in a remote rural area, his remains have yet to be positively identified. Fabiola Lalinde continues her courageous work to assist other families of "disappeared" people in Colombia. In a letter she wrote to Amnesty International, Fabiola Lalinde said:

"I don't think I have done anything extraordinary. All these seemingly heroic struggles of the women are nothing more than part of the commitment of being a mother, particularly in a country where life and human dignity are trodden under foot every moment. "

In 1992 the Commander of the Colombian army's Fifth Brigade publicly accused ASFADDES members of being "guerrilla sympathizers". Although the newspaper which published the commander's statement was later obliged by the courts to retract the accusations, since that time members of ASFADDES have been subjected to what appears to be a systematic campaign of individual and institutional harassment.

In September 1994 a telephoned death threat was received in the office of ASFADDES from an unidentified male caller. He asked for Yanette Bautista and Gloria Herney Galindez, President and Secretary General of ASFADDES respectively, and said: "Tell those bitches we are going to kill them." For several days before the telephoned threat, both women had been followed on numerous occasions by unidentified men in different vehicles.

During the organization's seven-day annual general meeting held in Bogotá in November 1993, many of the 100 participants were subjected to systematic harassment and intimidation by members of the Colombian army's intelligence brigade. Many were followed, surreptitiously photographed, verbally abused and threatened by armed men in civilian clothes.

Suspicion as to the identity of these men was confirmed by two official bodyguards who had been assigned to protect Nodelia Parra, a member of ASFADDES who had been receiving death threats. The bodyguards challenged one armed man who, after a struggle, identified himself as a member of the B-2 army intelligence unit. The bodyguards later identified the presence of at least eight more members of the B-2 unit in and around the hotel where the ASFADDES members were staying.

Following a formal complaint to the Colombian authorities, the Bogotá Regional Prosecutor ordered the police to intervene to stop the harassment. Four men who were subsequently arrested at the hotel by the police were formally identified as army intelligence agents attached to the XX brigade. However, they were almost immediately released without charge when an intelligence brigade army captain intervened on their behalf. A judicial investigation into the incident was closed after concluding that the B-2 army intelligence officials had been providing "protection" to the ASFADDES members.

Nodelia Parra, a 33-year-old teacher, is a member of the national executive of ASFADDES and has been active since the "disappearance" of her husband, Isidro Caballero. He was detained in February 1989 by a military patrol together with fellow political activist María del Carmen Santana in the municipality of San Alberto, department of Cesar. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

Nodelia Parra has campaigned persistently for an effective investigation into their "disappearance", and has presented the case to the IACHR. In September 1991 the IACHR issued a resolution condemning the Colombian Government for violating the American Convention on Human Rights in connection with the arrest and subsequent "disappearance" of Isidro Caballero and María del Carmen Santana by

members of the armed forces. In December 1992 the IACHR presented the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, where proceedings continue.

Nodelia Parra has been subjected to a systematic campaign of harassment and threats since she began campaigning on behalf of her husband. She has been forced to leave her home and move to other areas of the country several times because of grave fears for her safety.

Luz Marina Pérez, a teacher, has been an active member of ASFADDES since the "disappearance" of her first husband in 1987 when he was abducted by paramilitary forces. Based in the town of Ocaña, Norte de Santander department, she campaigned persistently for an effective investigation to establish his fate and bring the perpetrators to justice. She is also an active member of Ocaña's human rights committee. Since 1993 Luz Marina and her new husband, community leader Cristóbal Navarro, have increasingly been threatened and harassed.

In February 1994 Cristóbal Navarro was left paralysed from the waist down when gunmen shot him as he crossed the town's central square, which was heavily militarized at the time. Luz Marina fled with the injured Cristóbal and four of their six children to the city of Cúcuta where they lived with relatives while her husband received medical treatment for his injuries. Some months later, with Cristóbal confined to a wheelchair, they attempted to return to Ocaña but left shortly afterwards when they again received death threats. In June 1995 ASFADDES closed its office in Ocaña because the repeated threats and harassment of its members led to serious fears for their safety.

2.3 Women activists in Meta department

The department of Meta, in the eastern plains of Colombia, is one of the worst-hit areas of conflict in the country. A long-standing guerrilla presence has led to increased militarization of the region and the proliferation of paramilitary organizations responsible for widespread human rights violations against the civilian population. People who attempt to denounce the abuses or assist victims of human rights violations have been particular targets for attack.

Here, as in other areas of the country, women play an important role in defending human rights. Three women human rights activists have worked to create and consolidate the principal human rights organization in Meta department, the Civic Committee for Human Rights, based in the departmental capital of Villavicencio. These women are Teresa Mosquera, who was widowed in 1989 when paramilitary gunmen murdered her trade union leader husband; Islena Rey, treasurer of the Civic Committee, active member of the union at Electricity Company in Meta and a member of the executive committee of the United Confederation of Workers (CUT); and Sister Nohemy Palencia, who has dedicated more than 25 years of her life to helping others, first as a health worker with leprosy sufferers and then as a nun with the order of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Roman Catholic Church.

Since 1991 Sister Nohemy, Islena Rey, Teresa Mosquera and their colleagues in the Civic Committee have documented cases of human rights violations against the civilian population in Meta department. This has entailed travelling to remote, inaccessible and potentially dangerous areas to interview victims and witnesses. They have organized material and psychological help for the victims, as well as programs to assist families who have been internally displaced by the conflict, including health and education programs for the children.

However, threats and intimidation have been common since the Civic Committee began its work. Four members of the Committee have been shot dead by gunmen, believed to be members of paramilitary organizations, and three have "disappeared". By 1995 the constant threats, intimidation and attacks on the lives of members of the Civic Committee had taken their toll: the Committee, which four years previously represented 32 social organizations in Meta department, had only seven member organizations left. In February 1995 the threats increased. An anonymous caller telephoned the Diocesan house and left the following message for the Bishop who was out of town at the time: "The catholic nun Nohemy Palencia should take care, because they are going to kill her."

During the following weeks, the persecution intensified. Civic Committee members were followed, the army made attempts to identify the names and personal details of those who work there, and an anonymous tip-off was received that an attack against Sister Palencia and other Committee members had been planned. In mid-March another answerphone message was left: "You swine, I'm going to kill you all. I'm going to bomb you."

Sister Palencia left the country because of the risk to her security but she returned to her work after only six weeks. Other members of the Civic Committee left Villavicencio but continue their crucial

human rights work from Bogotá. On her return to Colombia, Sister Palencia managed to visit Villavicencio for three days. She said: "The situation has not improved. The threats continue. They have left messages on the Committee's answerphone, and strange cars continue to circle round the house of Josué [the Committee's President]."

The Colombian Government has condemned attacks against human rights workers and, in some cases, has assigned bodyguards to those who have been threatened. However, judicial and police authorities seem unable or unwilling to take action to provide adequate protection for people under threat of death or to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for threats, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions. As a result of the escalation of threats and harassment, an increasing number of human rights lawyers and activists have had to abandon their activities and seek refuge in other areas of the country or abroad.

3. VICTIMIZED FOR SPEAKING OUT

Many teachers working in small rural schools are women. Teachers in these areas often become community leaders because of their generally higher level of education; they are, therefore, more likely to become involved in helping the local population raise issues such as land reform and the need for basic services with local and national government authorities.

In areas where armed opposition groups are active, women in local leadership roles have frequently been identified as guerrilla supporters. Many women have been forced to abandon their schools and seek refuge in other areas of the country after being subjected to threats and intimidation. Some have been killed.

Several women teachers from rural schools around El Carmen de Chucurí, in the Magdalena Medio region, told Amnesty International that they were constantly harassed by paramilitary patrols. They had repeatedly been accused of collaboration with guerrillas in the area and of acting as couriers for them. These accusations appeared to be based on the fact that the teachers were obliged to travel regularly from the village schools to the nearby town to get their wages. In order to control the area, the paramilitaries had forbidden the local civilian population to travel outside their villages, and teachers who ignored these restrictions had been told to leave the area and threatened with violence. Several had received written death threats.

One threat, addressed to a young woman teacher working in the town of El Carmen de Chucurí, reads: "You old bitch, you grass: let this be a warning to you that we know everything you are doing to betray the people. If you continue to collaborate with those bastards the FARC and ELN... we will be very pleased. So you don't think this is just a fake, we will leave you a small present in your own home. This is the first warning — the second will be your present and with the third you will see your blood and the blood of your son. You had better get out of this village before it's too late."

Although many women are victims of human rights violations because of their roles as local and community leaders, some have clearly been targeted because of their political activities. The systematic elimination of leaders and active members of the left-wing Patriotic Union party (UP) is perhaps the most dramatic example of political intolerance in Colombia. More than 2,000 UP members have been killed since the party was created in 1985, including two presidential candidates. Aída Abella Esquivel, the current president of the UP and former member of Congress, has been subjected to repeated death threats because of her political activism, and on several occasions she has had to leave the country because of reliable information warning of plans to assassinate her. Although the Colombian government has taken steps to provide Aída Abella with protection, including assigning bodyguards to her, little effort has been made to investigate the source of the threats and to bring those responsible to justice.

Several UP women with local leadership roles have already been killed. In February 1990 Diana Cardona Saldarriaga, a leader of the UP and mayoress of Apartadó in the Urabá region of Antioquia department, was abducted from her home in Medellín and subsequently killed by men who claimed to be her officially assigned bodyguards, shortly before the genuine escorts arrived. The Procurator General publicly called on the Minister of Defence to explain how the gunmen had obtained confidential information about her whereabouts and plans. No satisfactory answer was given and those responsible for her murder have not been brought to justice. In 1992 the People's Defender published a

report which concluded that the main perpetrators of violence against UP activists were paramilitary groups, members of the security forces and hired gunmen.

Another UP leader, María Mercedes Méndez, former mayoress of El Castillo in Meta department, was killed in June 1992 when the car in which she was travelling was attacked by a paramilitary squad. Four others were killed with her, including the municipal treasurer, Rosa Peña Rodríguez. Just before the massacre, María Méndez had told local police and military authorities that paramilitary groups were operating in the area and had asked for protection.

Members of the judiciary or official human rights agencies investigating cases in which members of the army and security forces are implicated have routinely been subjected to intimidation and harassment and have even been killed if they persist with their enquiries. Women judges and judicial officials have also reported being subjected to sexual harassment by officials under investigation.

4. ARBITRARY ABUSES

While many women are victims of human rights abuses because of their political beliefs, many more are targeted just because they are living in areas where guerrilla forces are active.

Some have died during aerial bombardments in which civilian communities appear to have been deliberately targeted. On the evening of 10 February 1995, at least four helicopter gunships, together with several military planes, attacked the hamlet of Puerto Trujillo in Meta department. Houses were hit by sustained machine-gun fire and grenades launched from the army helicopters. Deyanira Ramos Jaramillo, a 49-year-old housewife, was hit in the chest as she ran towards her home when the firing began. She died shortly afterwards in the village pharmacy. Several other villagers were injured, including a five-year-old boy. The military authorities claimed they had been fired on by guerrilla forces hiding in the village, but this version of events was unanimously rejected by the villagers, who stated there were no guerrillas in the village at the time of the attack.

Other women have been detained, tortured or raped, and have subsequently "disappeared" or been killed. In October 1993, in El Bosque, in the municipality of Riofrío, Valle de Cauca department, six women were among members of two families dragged from their homes, tortured and killed by army and paramilitary personnel. According to witnesses, men in combat fatigues, some wearing police or army uniforms and some with their faces covered, arrived in the community early in the morning. Seven members of the Ladino family and a man staying in their house at the time were tortured and killed by the armed men later that morning, together with five members of the Molina family.

Military commanders immediately claimed that the 13 victims were members of the ELN, who had died in a confrontation with armed forces from the Palacé battalion. However, this version was contradicted by eye-witnesses, who claim the dead were peasant farmers who were unarmed when shot. The women victims were: Carmen Emilia Ladino (aged 33), a Gregorian nun who taught at the local school and acted as community nurse; Luz Edelsi Tusarma (aged 16), who was four months pregnant when she was murdered (her boyfriend was a member of the Molina family); María Zenaída Ladino (aged 35); Lucelly Colorada de Ladino (aged 35); Dora Estela Gavidia Ladino (aged 16) and Rita Edilia Suaza de Molina (50). Five of the women were raped before being shot. Both families had settled in El Bosque some 40 years earlier after fleeing violence in other parts of the department.

Following this massacre, the government announced that the commander of the Palacé Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Luis Felipe Becerra, had been discharged from the army. Subsequent investigations led to arrest warrants being issued against him and several other members of the armed forces. However, he remains a "fugitive from justice".

Lieutenant-Colonel Becerra had already faced charges in connection with a series of massacres of banana plantation workers in the Urabá region of Antioquia department in 1988. A woman judge who investigated the massacre received repeated death threats and as a result left the country. Her father was murdered shortly afterwards. Only days before leaving, she had issued arrest warrants against four army officers, including Luis Felipe Becerra, then a major, in connection with the killings. However, far from being arrested, Major Becerra was sent on a training course before being promoted and then appointed to head the army's press and public relations department.

Hildegard María Feldmann, a Catholic lay missionary and nurse, was killed with José Ramón Rojas Erazo and Hernando García, two peasant farmers from El Sande, in Guachaves municipality, Nariño department, by soldiers from the Caballería Mecanizada No 3 Cabal, attached to the army's III brigade.

Hildegard Feldmann was a member of the Community of Lay Missionaries of Fribourg, Switzerland, and had worked as a nurse and midwife in rural Colombia since 1983. On 9 September 1990, she was tending a sick woman in the home of José Ramón Rojas Erazo when troops opened fire on the house without warning. Hildegard Feldmann and José Ramón Rojas Erazo died instantly. Hernando García, who had sought refuge with his wife and other villagers behind Ramón Rojas' house, was wounded in the leg by the soldiers and tried to hide under some rocks near a river. Soon afterwards, a group of soldiers found and killed him.

FARC guerrillas had been active in El Sande at that time. A group of them were reportedly bathing in a nearby river when the soldiers attacked the area, and an unidentified guerrilla was killed. Military authorities immediately issued a communiqué claiming to have killed four guerrillas, including Hildegard Feldmann, in combat. Later, the army changed its version of events, claiming that Hildegard Feldmann had been killed while working as a nurse in a house where an armed group had been found, and that she had been killed in the crossfire between the army and FARC guerrillas. This version of events was refuted by eye-witnesses who testified that no-one in the house had fired at the military. Official investigations into the incident initially exonerated the army of responsibility for the killings but in April 1995 the Procurator Delegate for the Armed Forces brought disciplinary charges against two members of the III brigade.

Women living in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to abuse, including torture. Although some have been specifically targeted because of their community leadership role, the majority are random victims, targeted for abuse simply because they are easily located in their homes by army and paramilitary patrols. A peasant woman living in the conflict-torn area of Magdalena Medio in central Colombia told the provincial procurator in Barrancabermeja how she had been tortured and forced to patrol with a unit attached to the Luciano D'Elhuyert battalion of the Colombian army:

"My husband and I have a small plot of land in the hamlet of La Putana. On Friday 26 August 1994, at 9am, soldiers from the Luciano D'Elhuyert battalion arrived at my house accompanied by members of the paramilitary group Los Masetos. I was alone; my husband was working with a neighbour far from the house. They came into my home and told me I had to tell them where the guerrillas were. I said I didn't know anything. The lieutenant who was in charge of the joint [army and paramilitary] patrol told me I had to know but I told them I knew nothing, I just work at home. Then the lieutenant angrily ordered the men to get a bucket of water, to which they added four kg of salt. The lieutenant told them to wrap a towel very tightly round my nose and mouth and like this they stuck my head in the bucket. I felt as if I was drowning and tried to get away. One of the soldiers climbed on my back and sat on my neck. When I couldn't stand any more and was almost fainting, the soldier got off my back and they lifted my head from the bucket."

The woman was forced to put on a military uniform and patrol the area for several hours with the soldiers and paramilitary before they returned to her house. After subjecting her to a mock execution they left, taking with them all the food in the house, five hens, a radio and the family's clothes and shoes. Before leaving, they destroyed what little furniture the family had, including their bed and mattress.

4.1 Urban "death squads"

In recent years, women, including young girls, have been killed in urban areas by police-backed "death squads". Killings of "social undesirables" are endemic in Colombian cities. These are known as "social cleansing killings". Many prostitutes have been among the victims, together with homosexuals, vagrants, including street children, and drug-traffickers. They have been shot dead on the street or seized and driven away by heavily armed men. Their bodies, often showing signs of torture, have later been found dumped by roadsides or on rubbish tips on the outskirts of the cities.

Three young prostitutes, Ana Delia Cardona Gil and two other young women whose names are unknown, were seized by a group of armed men in the municipality of Cartago, Valle department, in November 1994. They were found dead shortly afterwards. One of the women had apparently been beaten to death, while the other two had been shot.

Young women have also been among the hundreds of young people murdered by shadowy "death squads" in the poor neighbourhoods of the major cities, particularly Medellín, Bogotá and Cali. Between June 1993 and September 1994 more than one thousand young people, including a significant

number of girls, were killed in the city of Cali alone, according to a study produced by Parces Program a city council initiative to disarm and rehabilitate members of juvenile street gangs in the city.

5. VICTIMS OF ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS

"Whoever is not with us is against us and is considered by the organization to be an informant. Your days are numbered and we will be waiting for the opportunity to carry out our death sentence."

This death threat, made by the ELN, was one of a number received by a secondary schoolteacher in the municipality of Sácame in Casanare, after she established a friendship with a local army commander. In July 1992 the woman made a formal complaint to the Attorney General's office against the ELN, whom she accused of threatening her with death because of her friendship with the local army commander.

Her case is not unusual. Amnesty International has received persistent reports that in areas with a guerrilla presence, women who socialize with members of the armed forces and police have been harassed, threatened and — in several cases — killed by members of armed opposition groups.

Some guerrilla groups have resorted to the practice of abduction and forcible recruitment of young women from rural areas where they operate. Other women have been kidnapped and held hostage by guerrilla organizations — something that has become increasingly widespread as ransom money has become one of the principal sources of income for guerrilla groups. Some kidnap victims, particularly women holding public office such as mayoresses and local councillors, are held hostage for political motives, either to pressurize them into implementing guerrilla proposals in their administrations or in an attempt to demand publicity for their policies. However, reliable statistics for the number of women kidnapped by armed political groups are difficult to compile.

Hundreds of people have also been kidnapped by drug-trafficking organizations and other criminal groups; many kidnappings go unreported by relatives, who prefer to try to secure the release of hostages without the intervention of the security forces. There are persistent reports that some victims have been killed when ransom demands are not met and, in some cases, even when ransoms have been paid.

All the main guerrilla groups in Colombia have been responsible for the deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians including women.

Responsibility for the abduction and murder of four women in Saravena, Arauca department, in May 1995, was attributed by the local civilian and military authorities to the ELN. Fifteen-year-old Alice Yaneth Lima González and 14-year-old Guadalupe Romero Oviedo were among the victims who were taken from a house in Saravena, where they were believed to be working as prostitutes, by armed men in military-style uniforms. Their bodies, with several bullet wounds, were found hours later on the outskirts of the town. The ELN's internal rules of war seem to admit as legitimate the arbitrary and deliberate killings of women in some cases, excluding "...pregnant women and mothers with young children".

Although women have often been victims of guerrilla attacks, many play an active role in armed opposition groups. Some have become combatants and, as such, face the risk of death in combat. Others, who have been designated logistical support tasks or intelligence work, have faced the possibility of being captured, tortured, or "disappearance".

Nydia Erica Bautista, a member of the 19 April Movement (M-19) guerrilla organization's urban wing, was seized by a group of heavily armed men near her home in Bogotá in August 1987. Despite persistent efforts by her relatives to find her, her whereabouts remained unknown until three years later when a military intelligence agent revealed that she had been taken to a farm on the outskirts of Bogotá by army personnel from the intelligence battalion Charry Solano and held there for two days before being shot dead and buried in a common grave in the town of Guayabetal. According to the forensic report, Nydia Erica Bautista was found blindfolded and with her hands tied. Her body showed signs of torture. Almost eight years after her "disappearance", in July 1995, the Procurator Delegate for Human Rights ordered the dismissal from the armed forces of brigadier-general Alvaro Velandia Hurtado and sergeant Julio Ortega for their part in her "disappearance", torture and murder.

6. WOMEN: PRINCIPAL VICTIMS OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

Tens of thousands of peasant women, many of them recently widowed, have been forced to flee their rural homes with their children, abandoning their livestock and possessions, to take precarious refuge in shanty towns surrounding towns and cities where they, but particularly their children, may be preyed upon by urban "death squads". Fearing reprisals, most do not report the attacks and abuse which are the cause of their displacement and so their plight frequently goes unnoticed and they receive little or no assistance.

According to a recent report by the Episcopal Conference of the Colombian Catholic Church, an estimated 600,000 civilians have been displaced by the civil conflict in the past 10 years. More than 39,000 women included in the Roman Catholic Church's census had lost husbands or sons shortly before fleeing their homes.

In a report of a visit to Colombia in 1994, Francis Deng, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, said:

"Women in their role as mothers have been particularly affected by the violence and the adverse socio-economic situation in the areas of reception. The situation of a large number of widows was one of particular concern to the Representative... Numerous testimonies received by the Representative as well as the discussions he had with the Government indicate that the civilian population living in combat zones is the most susceptible to being displaced; in these so-called "red zones" [zones controlled or influenced by the guerrillas], the armed forces often resort to air raids, followed by ground searches, which force people to move temporarily or permanently. These testimonies indicate further that often the distinction between guerrillas and non-combatants is lost... Guerrilla actions, such as the mining of roads where a police or army vehicle may pass, or ambushes causing civilian casualties have also been responsible for displacement... Other sources have reported incidents whereby women and children have been shot at while fleeing in areas where the Mobile Brigades⁵ are active."⁶

One woman, displaced from her home in the Urabá region of Antioquia department, said:

"I came to this neighbourhood because on 19 November [1994] some men dressed in uniforms like the army wear came to our smallholding. They asked my husband questions, then they beat him, tied him up and took him away. My daughter was desperately crying and screaming for them not to kill her father. It's just as well only she and I and the baby were at home and that the other children didn't have to see it... The next day I found him dead, in a spot about three hours' walk from our home."

Another woman forced to flee her home said:

The process of displacement begins with the repression. They start to accuse and threaten you... There were constant incursions in the area where we lived. Little by little the families started leaving as the pressure on the population increased. We don't know what happened to those who stayed behind. The first time we left we went to another town, but because of the difficult economic situation — we couldn't find work or accommodation — we had to return to where we came from. We came to this place because the insecurity continued.

"There are many differences in our lives... In the country, we did not have to worry about work, we all worked on the farm and had everything. The men worked the land and the women helped them. We did the work in the house, looked after the children and we helped with the men's work; we also looked after the animals. The truth is that things were not too bad. If we needed something, we could sell or kill an animal. There was always enough to survive. Here it's different. You need money for everything; work is really difficult to get and the men can't find any. The

7. CONCLUSIONS

Although Colombia has made much progress in recognizing, at least in theory, the equality of women, it is clear that little effective action has been taken so far to implement these stipulations.

Unlike women in some countries affected by civil conflict and political violence, women in Colombia are not the principal targets of serious human rights violations. There is, however, compelling evidence that the Colombian armed forces, their paramilitary allies and the armed opposition groups have all committed frequent and persistent abuses against women, particularly in rural areas. These abuses have been carried out with impunity. As women increasingly assume leadership roles in their local communities, professional associations and grassroots movements, they face a growing risk of becoming the victims of human rights violations. Among the most common practices are threats and intimidation, ill-treatment and torture, including rape, and extrajudicial execution. Human rights

activists have been particularly singled out for harassment and intimidation by the security forces and paramilitary organizations.

In addition, women continue to be the main victims indirectly affected by political violence, either through internal displacement or because they are forced to assume economic and social responsibility as the heads of the household when their husbands or fathers are killed. Women in the poorest strata of society have been most severely affected.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International calls on the Colombian Government to increase protection for women. It urges the government to:

fulfill its stated commitments to ensure that women's human rights are protected: torture including rape, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions, must be brought to an end. This would be in line with the government's constitutional obligations to ensure that women gain full participation and equality in Colombian society and is an essential first step if such a goal is to be reached;

conduct prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into all reports of "disappearances", extrajudicial executions and torture, including rape and sexual abuse, in line with governmental commitments to tackle impunity and end human rights violations;

take effective steps to ensure that those responsible for extrajudicial execution, "disappearance" and torture, including rape and sexual abuse against women are brought to justice, in line with governmental commitments to tackle impunity and end human rights violations;

ensure that cases of such human rights violations perpetrated by members of the security forces are investigated and tried under civilian jurisdiction and not by the military courts, which have been responsible for ensuring the virtually complete impunity of members of the security forces responsible for human rights violations;

ensure that action is taken to dismantle paramilitary groups and bring members of these groups responsible for human rights violations to justice, in line with governmental commitments;

ensure that the practice of killing, abducting or torturing women in order to bring pressure on their relatives is not tolerated. Anyone responsible for such acts should be brought to justice;

ensure victims of rape, sexual abuse and other torture or ill-treatment, together with relatives of victims of "disappearance" or extrajudicial execution, should receive fair and adequate compensation and appropriate medical care;

ensure that law enforcement personnel and other government agents receive adequate training on national and international standards which protect the human rights of all women, and instruction on how to enforce them properly. Law enforcement personnel and other government agents should be instructed that rape of women in their custody is an act of torture and will not be tolerated;

take steps to ensure respect for the fundamental human rights of women who have been internally displaced by the conflict. Concrete measures should be taken to ensure they receive protection and assistance;

guarantee that women activists and members of non-governmental organizations working peacefully for the promotion and protection of human rights can carry out their legitimate activities without risk of intimidation, harassment or physical attack;

ensure that special steps are taken to uphold the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and other relevant non-treaty standards, including the UN Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. These steps should include a clear prohibition of gender-based violence, whether occurring in public or private life.

Amnesty International urges the leaders of armed opposition groups to:

take immediate steps to safeguard women's human rights;

observe minimum humanitarian standards, as set out in the Geneva Conventions, in particular to treat civilians humanely and to prevent deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture (including rape), ill-treatment and hostage-taking;

conduct proper investigations into alleged abuses by guerrilla combatants in order to determine responsibility;

ensure that individuals suspected of committing or ordering abuses against women, such as deliberate and arbitrary killings, the taking of hostages or the torture or ill-treatment of captives, should be removed from any position of authority and all duties which bring them into contact with captives or others at risk of abuse.

Women in Colombia keywords

KEYWORDS: WOMEN1 / HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS1 / FAMILIES1 / DISPLACED PEOPLE1 / LAWYERS / PEASANTS / TEACHERS1 / TRADE UNIONISTS / RELIGIOUS OFFICIALS - CATHOLIC / COMMUNITY LEADERS / POLITICAL ACTIVISTS / LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES / HOUSEWIVES / NURSES / PREGNANCY / FOREIGN NATIONALS / JUVENILES / HARASSMENT1 / EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTION / ATTEMPTED ABDUCTION / DISAPPEARANCES / SURVEILLANCE / ATTACKS / DISABLEMENT / SEXUAL ASSAULT / TORTURE/ILL-TREATMENT / HOSTAGE TAKING / IMPUNITY1 / ARMED CONFLICT1 / MILITARY1 / PARAMILITARIES1 / NON-GOVERNMENTAL ENTITIES1 / INVESTIGATION OF ABUSES / PRISONERS' TESTIMONIES /