

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Death threats/Fear for safety

10 February 1993

COLOMBIA: Saúl PICO GOMEZ, mayor
Humberto GEOVO ALMANZA, ombudsman

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Saúl Pico Gomez and Humberto Geovo Almanza, mayor and *personero* (ombudsman) respectively of the town of San Vicente de Chucurí, Santander department. They have been subjected to serious harassment and death threats by paramilitary forces under the command of the Colombian army. In Colombia the *personero* is a municipal appointment and has a human rights monitoring role.

Mayor Saúl Pico has been the victim of constant harassment and death threats since November 1992 and two of his assistants (whose names are not known to Amnesty International) have reportedly been killed in recent weeks. On 13 November 1992 at 8.15 pm Mayor Saúl Pico was in his office with his wife and several others, when the electricity supply was cut off. Fearing an imminent attack, the mayor took cover. From outside the building shots were fired into the office. Fortunately no one was hurt. On the days leading up to the attack it was reported that known paramilitary leaders were in San Vicente and had been seen entering and leaving the headquarters of the army's Luciano D'Elhuyar battalion, Batallón Luciano D'Elhuyar, outside the town. On 28 January 1993, a *sufragio* (an invitation to his own funeral mass) arrived at the office of Humberto Geovo, threatening him to resign his post or be killed.

Because of these threats and acts of intimidation both Humberto Geovo and Mayor Saúl Pico were forced to leave San Vicente. They tried to seek clear guarantees from the armed forces that if they returned they would be able to carry out their public functions without fear for their lives. However, in a meeting with the Secretary General of the Army, Secretario General del Ejército, General Rogel Sánchez, they were told that "there could be no commitment to guarantee protection to these local officials. The decision to return was theirs alone", "*no podía existir compromiso de prestarle seguridad a estos oficiales locales. Era decisión suya si regresar o no.*" A further request for protection has been made through the Procurator Delegate for the Military Forces, Procurador Delegado para las Fuerzas Militares. Despite this lack of guarantees, Mayor Saúl Pico has returned to San Vicente. There is serious concern for the safety of both men.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In October 1992, Amnesty International learned that the armed forces were carrying out a series of joint military operations with paramilitary forces in several localities around San Vicente and neighbouring Carmen de Chucurí. Peasant farmers in the region were told by military and paramilitary commanders that they must cooperate with paramilitary forces and participate in their counter-insurgency operations. Those who refuse have been tortured, "disappeared" or killed. Many others have fled the region. (Please refer to UA 16/93, AMR 23/03/93, 21 January 1993 and follow-up AMR 23/04/93, 4 February 1993.)

San Vicente de Chucurí is at the heart of the largely rural area of the Magdalena Medio in central Colombia. This area has been a focus of political violence for several years following the emergence of guerrilla groups in the 1960s and the subsequent militarization of the region during the 1980s. Peace talks between the remaining active guerrilla groups and the government broke down in early 1992 and there has been a resultant increase in guerrilla activity and in the armed forces counter-guerrilla operations. The government declared a national state of emergency in November 1992, the period of which has just been extended. In areas where guerrilla forces are active, the local population is often perceived by the armed forces as potential guerrilla collaborators and has, as a result, been

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subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution by army personnel and paramilitary forces.

Although in 1989 the Colombian government suspended the legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the Colombian armed forces to combat and disband such groups, paramilitary forces have continued to kill and "disappear" perceived opponents with impunity in many areas of the country and continue to operate with the support of the Colombian armed forces.

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

- expressing concern at the reported intimidation and threats against Saúl Pico Gómez and Humberto Geovo Almanza by paramilitary personnel;

- requesting an immediate and thorough investigation into these acts of intimidation and urging that those responsible be brought to justice;

- urging that the Colombian authorities take all possible measures to protect the lives of civilian officials and ensure that they are able to carry out their lawful activities;

- urging that the Colombian government take effective measures to ensure that paramilitary forces be dismantled as per the directives issued in 1989;

- requesting that an investigation be conducted into the alleged links between the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary groups in the region of San Vicente and Carmen de Chucurí in Santander department, the results of which should be made public.

APPEALS TO

1) Minister of Defence:

Dr. Rafael Pardo Rueda

Ministerio de Defensa Nacional

Ministerio de Defensa Nacional

Avenida Eldorado - Carrera 52

Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa Pardo
Rueda, Bogota, Colombia**

Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO;

44561 CFAC CO

Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874

**Salutation: Sr. Ministro /
Dear Minister**

2) Commander of the army's II Division:

Mayor General Harold Bedoya Pizarro

Comandante de la Segunda División del

Ejército

Bucaramanga

Santander, Colombia

**Telegrams: Comandante II División del
Ejército, Bucaramanga,
Santander, Colombia**

Salutation: Sr. Comandante / Dear Sir

3) President of Colombia:
Señor Presidente César Gaviria Trujillo
Presidente de la República
Palacio de Nariño
Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: President Gaviria, Bogotá,

Colombia

Telexes: 44281 PALP CO
Faxes: + 57 1 286 7324,
+ 57 1 286 7434,
+ 57 1 287 7937

Salutation:Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente
/
Dear President Gaviria

4) Procurator General:
Dr. Carlos Gustavo Arrieta Padilla
Procurador General de la Nación
Procuraduría General
Edificio Banco Ganadero
Carrera 5, No. 15-80
Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Procurador General Arrieta,

Bogotá,
Colombia

Faxes: + 57 1 284 0472

Salutation:Sr Procurador de la Nación/
Dear Dr. Arrieta

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS 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 24 March 1993.