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PRIORITY

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Death Threats

2 October 1991

COLOMBIA: Eduardo UMANA MENDOZA, human rights lawyer

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of human rights lawyer Eduardo Umaña Mendoza following repeated threats to his life.

According to information received by Amnesty International, during the last week of September Dr Umaña Mendoza received a number of anonymous phone calls warning him to stop his human rights activities or he would be killed. On 1 October 1991, the number of threats against Dr Umaña Mendoza increased dramatically and were made both to his office and private phones.

Although no specific motive has been given by those issuing the threats, it is believed they may be connected to Dr Umaña's role in representing the surviving members of a peasant family whose relatives were allegedly killed by members of the Colombian army (see UA 286/91, AMR 23/43/91, 21 August).

On 18 August Antonio Palacios Urrea, three of his children, Blanca Cecilia, Janeth and Camilo, and Janeth's husband, Rodrigo Barrera Vanegas, were shot dead by a group of some 30 soldiers who broke into the house early in the morning. Two men, whose identify is not yet clear, were also found dead at the entrance to the house. A military communiqué from the commander of the 13th Brigade of the Colombian Army subsequently alleged that the seven people killed were members of a guerrilla group who had been killed during an armed confrontation with soldiers. However, this version of events contradicted the reports of eye-witnesses as well as the findings of police and journalists who visited the scene shortly afterwards, who have stated that there was no evidence that the people inside the house had fired upon their attackers.

At the end of September, the military court No 115 issued arrest warrants against 7 members of the army's Artillery School, attached to the 13th Brigade, in connection with the killings. Antonio Palacios' widow, María Belarmina Romero, and several other witnesses in the case have also reportedly received death threats.

The Colombian Procurator General and the Presidential Human Rights Adviser have been informed of the threats against Dr Umaña Mendoza and have taken some steps to safeguard his immediate physical integrity. However, Amnesty International remains concerned about the long-term safety of Dr Umaña Mendoza and other human rights lawyers and workers in Colombia and would urge the Colombian authorities to investigate, as a matter of urgency, the threats against Dr Umaña Mendoza and to take measures to ensure he is able fully to carry out his professional activities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

President César Gaviria Trujillo has repeatedly pledged his government's commitment to protect human rights. In his inaugural address in August 1990, he said that "the public opinion's trust and credibility in the armed forces depend on the armed forces' acting according to the constitution. The armed forces must respect human rights because the country's defence also means upholding the law". However, despite the government's commitment to uphold respect for human rights, members of the Colombian armed forces have continued to commit serious abuses, including torture, extrajudicial execution and

"disappearance". Human rights defenders have increasingly been among the victims of such abuses.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters:

- expressing concern for the safety of Dr Eduardo Umaña Mendoza following the receipt of repeated death threats;
- urging that an immediate investigation be conducted into the death threats in order to identify those responsible and bring them to justice;
- urging the Colombian authorities to take measures to guarantee that human rights lawyers and workers are able to carry out their lawful activities.

APPEALS TO:

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President of the Republic:

Señor Presidente César Gaviria Trujillo **Excelentísimo**
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Commander, 13th Brigade:

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 Jesús María Vergara Aragón
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 Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Comandante XIII Brigada, Bogota, Colombia

Minister of Justice:

Fernando Carillo **Sr. Ministro**
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Procurator General:

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and to diplomatic representatives of Colombia in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 13 November 1991.