

TRADE UNIONISTS UNDER ATTACK IN COLOMBIA

Defending the rights of workers in the food industry

On 10 February 2007 a written paramilitary death threat targeting the food workers' union SINALTRAINAL was pushed under the door of the offices of the public services union ASTDEMP in Bucaramanga, Santander Department. The death threat named several SINALTRAINAL activists and accused them of being "terrorist Coca Cola trade unionists". The trade unionists were warned to put an end to the "trouble in the Coca Cola company as enough damage has already been caused" and that if they failed to do so, they would become military targets of paramilitary groups. In June 2007, Coca Cola Company wrote to Amnesty International explaining that they had communicated with the Colombian authorities on several occasions about threats against SINALTRAINAL activists and had called on the authorities to investigate these threats and guarantee the safety of the threatened trade unionists. For example, in a letter of 12 February 2007, Coca Cola FEMSA called on state authorities to take action to guarantee the safety of **Javier Correa, Luis García, Domingo Flores** and **Nelson Pérez** after they were named in the 10 February 2007 death threat.

On 18 August 2006, a death threat was sent to the home of **Héctor Jairo Paz**, a leader of the Bugalagrande Branch of SINALTRAINAL. The death threat was reportedly written in the form of a message of condolence, a traditional form of threat. It was signed by the paramilitary group Death to Trade Unionists. Héctor Jairo Paz is a worker at the Nestlé de Colombia S.A. plant in Bugalagrande and the threat followed a previous death threat made against the leaders of the Bugalagrande Branch of SINALTRAINAL 10 days earlier. This death threat was received during a SINALTRAINAL protest against the reported dismissal of 90 workers. On 4 June 2007, Nestlé wrote to Amnesty International stating CICALAC and Nestlé de Colombia had called on the Colombian authorities to assist Héctor Jairo Paz in taking measures to guarantee his safety. The company also reportedly offered some assistance directly to Héctor Jairo Paz.

In recent years, members of SINALTRAINAL, the Colombian food workers union, have been involved in a number of labour disputes, often with large multinational companies.

Who is responsible for these human rights violations?

Many of the human rights abuses committed against trade unionists cannot be attributed to any particular group. However, of those where there is clear evidence of responsibility, the security forces and army-backed paramilitary groups are responsible for the overwhelming majority. A number of cases have been attributed to guerrilla organizations.

Over the past four decades, Colombia has been riven by an armed conflict between the security forces and paramilitaries on the one side and on the other by guerrilla forces, the largest of which is the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC). Although there has been a decrease in certain types of violence associated with the armed conflict, the human rights situation in Colombia remains dire. All parties to the conflict continue to commit war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international law.

The conflict provides a useful cover for those seeking to expand and protect economic interests. Over 60 per cent of the more than 3 million internally displaced people in Colombia have been

forced from their homes and lands in areas of mineral, agricultural or other economic importance.

Although more than 30,000 paramilitaries have reportedly been "demobilized" in the last three years in a controversial government-sponsored demobilization process, there is strong evidence that paramilitary groups continue to operate and have been responsible for human rights violations including threats, killings, and enforced disappearances. Sometimes these crimes have been committed with the acquiescence of or in collusion with the security forces.

These disputes have often coincided with reports of human rights violations against union members.

Trade unionists are frequently labelled as subversive by the security forces and paramilitaries. Such criticisms are often followed by human rights violations which also frequently coincide with periods of labour unrest or negotiations over working conditions.

Luciano Enrique Romero Molina, a leader of the Cesar branch of SINALTRAINAL and of the human rights organization Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee, was killed in September 2005. His body bore more than 40 stab wounds. He had been employed by Nestlé-CICOLAC Company in Valledupar, Cesar Department. In June 2007, Nestlé informed Amnesty International that CICOLAC and Nestlé de Colombia had called on the Colombian authorities to investigate the killing of Luciano Romero. At the time of writing, no one had been brought to justice for his killing.

The circumstances of his death suggest that he was killed because of his trade union activities. On 28 February 2002, SINALTRAINAL presented a series of demands for improved working conditions to the Nestlé-CICOLAC Company. No agreement was reached and on 12 July the workers went on strike. Death threats from paramilitary groups against

SINALTRAINAL leaders increased during the strike. In October 2002, a number of workers were sacked, among them Luciano Romero. He subsequently fled the country in fear of his life following a series of death threats. In April 2005 Luciano Romero returned to Colombia. He was due to travel to Switzerland to attend a meeting in October 2005 as a witness to death threats against trade unionists representing workers in Nestlé plants in Colombia. On 11 September 2005, Luciano Romero's body was found in the Las Palmeras farm in the La Nevada neighbourhood of Valledupar, Cesar Department. This area was reportedly under the control of paramilitaries, despite the fact that paramilitary forces operating in the region were supposedly engaged in a process of demobilization between December 2004 and March 2006.

Trade unionists in Colombia are at grave risk of human rights abuses. Successive Colombian governments have implemented a series of policies to improve the protection of trade unionists. However, this has not effectively guaranteed the safety of trade union activists and their families. The long-term security of trade unionists depends on decisive action by the Colombian authorities to end the impunity which protects the vast majority of those responsible for the human rights abuses against them.

ACT NOW

Please write to:

▶ **Presidente de la República de Colombia**, Dr. Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Bogotá, Colombia

Express concern at the human rights crisis faced by trade unionists in Colombia and urge him to ensure the Colombian authorities take decisive measures, in accordance with the wishes of those at risk, to guarantee their safety. Call on him to ensure that the recommendations of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights are fully implemented. Urge him to ensure that the death threats against and killings of SINALTRAINAL members are fully and impartially investigated, that the results are made public and that those responsible are brought to justice. Remind him that in June 2006 the Colombian government signed a Tripartite Agreement with trade unions and employers in which it committed itself to ensure an end to impunity for human rights abuses against trade unionists. Urge him to ensure that the criminal special

investigations unit of Colombia's Office of the Attorney General, set up as a result of this Agreement to investigate violations and abuses against trade unionists, is adequately staffed and funded.

- ▶ **Your Minister of Foreign Affairs**, raising these points and asking how your government is going to call on the Colombian authorities to fulfil these recommendations. If your foreign ministry is in contact with guerrilla groups, ask officials to call on these groups to put an end to killings of trade unionists.
- ▶ **Your trade union**, urging it to raise these issues with the Colombian government and your own government.

Several sections of Amnesty International are undertaking other campaign work on the situation of trade unionists in Colombia. You may wish to contact the Amnesty International section in your country to check if it is participating in this campaign work and how you can get involved.

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