

## TRADE UNIONISTS UNDER ATTACK IN COLOMBIA

### Defending the rights of peasant farmers

**Luis Miguel Gómez Porto**, President of the peasant farmers' union SINDEAGRICULTORES and a leader of FENSUAGRO, the agricultural workers' union, was killed on 3 May 2007, reportedly by members of the Battalion of Fusiliers of the Marine Infantry No. 4 in the Ojito area of the municipality of Ovejas, Sucre Department. According to information received, he had been arrested in April 2005 on charges of subversion and released on 18 May 2006. It is not clear if the case against him had been closed. Luis Gómez was reported to have been killed after he left his home to visit relatives; the army claimed that he was a guerrilla killed in combat.

Members of peasant farmers' unions in areas of conflict in Colombia have repeatedly been victims of human rights violations and abuses. Those campaigning for land rights have often been labelled subversive by the security forces and the paramilitaries. These accusations have repeatedly been followed by serious human rights violations committed against members of peasant farmer organizations by the security forces or paramilitaries. Within the context of Colombia's long-running armed conflict, more than 3 million people have been forcibly displaced from their lands.

Many of these lands have been occupied by paramilitaries and powerful economic interests eager to

### 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.

exploit the land's agro-industrial, mineral wealth or other economic potential. Non-governmental human rights organizations estimate that over 2 million hectares of land have been illegally obtained by paramilitaries and interests associated with paramilitary forces. Threats and killings of peasant farmers by the guerrilla group FARC have also resulted in forced displacement of large numbers of peasant farmers.

Legislative initiatives the government is promoting will provide a means for those who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity to legalize tenure of lands they have occupied by force. This may explain much of the current violence against peasant farmer organizations.

On 2 January 2006, the body of **Carlos Arciniegas Niño**, a former member of the executive council of the National Trade Union of Farm Workers (SINTRAINAGRO), was discovered in Puerto Wilches Municipality, Santander Department. Carlos

Arciniegas had been missing since 30 December 2005, when he was reported to have been in Barrancabermeja. Carlos Arciniegas had been bound and shot three times and his body bore the signs of torture. The killing has been attributed to the Central Bolívar Bloc of the paramilitary umbrella group the AUC. He had allegedly been threatened by paramilitaries before his death. Carlos Arciniegas had represented African Palm plantation workers in talks with employers.

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 members of FENSUAGRO, SINDEAGRICULTORES and SINTRAINAGRO 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.