

TRADE UNIONISTS UNDER ATTACK IN COLOMBIA

Defending the rights of education, health and public service workers

Arselio Peñas Guatico and **Jhon Jairo Osorio Pisario** were members of the Wounáan Indigenous community in Chocó Department. They were teachers and members of the Union of Teachers of Chocó Department (Unión de Maestros del Chocó). FARC guerrillas dragged Arselio Peñas Guatico from the school where he was teaching in the community on 30 March 2006. His body was found later the same day outside the community. Jhon Jairo Osorio Pisario was reportedly forced out of the boat in which he was travelling towards the municipality of Istmina by FARC guerrillas on 31 March. His body was found the next day. According to the Indigenous communities, the FARC had accused the two teachers of being army informants.

Colombian trade unionists working in education, health and public services are being threatened, intimidated and killed. In education, for example, more trade unionists were killed than in any other sector: 35 education workers were killed in 2006.

Trade unionists working in education and health are targeted not only because of their trade union work, but also often because they work in areas of intense conflict. Parties to the armed conflict accuse them of siding with their enemies. Medical professionals are often accused by the security forces of siding with guerrilla groups, particularly when they treat wounded combatants, which they may do voluntarily or as a result of coercion. Guerrilla groups make similar allegations when health workers treat security force personnel. Health, education and public service sector trade unionists have been targeted because of their campaigns against proposed government reforms, including privatization, and in the context of labour disputes, suggesting that they are being targeted because of their work in support of socio-economic rights.

On 25 November 2005, a bomb exploded in the conference hall of the María Inmaculada Hospital in Florencia, Caquetá Department. At the time, a meeting organized by the health workers' union ANTHOC was under way to discuss changes to the

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.

provision of health care promoted by regional health authorities, including moves towards the privatization of health service provision and the laying-off of health workers. The explosion killed **Jairo Antonio Fajardo**, a health worker and community leader in the municipality of Cartagena del Chairá, and injured seven others. Jairo Antonio Fajardo had been detained for eight months accused of rebellion and subsequently released as a result of a lack of evidence against him. Reportedly, the explosion occurred after **Wilson Pérez Méndez** and **Alfredo Castro**, leaders of ANTHOC, had received telephone death threats, allegedly from paramilitaries. The authorities claimed that Jairo Antonio Fajardo had planted the bomb.

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.

Martha Cecilia Díaz Suárez, president of the public services union ASTDEMP, was abducted by unknown individuals on 15 August 2006 in Bucaramanga. They forced her to board a vehicle and took her to an area bordering the municipalities of Floridablanca and Girón. Her attackers accused her of being a guerrilla, demanded information about the president and

treasurer of the Trade Union Congress (CUT), Santander Department branch, David Florez and César Plazas, and beat her. They also showed her a photograph of one of her daughters and told her that they had killed her. Martha Cecilia Díaz was shown photographs of herself participating in a CUT demonstration the previous week in Bucaramanga. Martha Cecilia Díaz' abduction followed death threats against the ASTDEMP and the USITRAS unions in March 2006. On 22 September 2006 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States called on the Colombian government to take measures to protect Martha Cecilia Díaz and the Vice-President of ASTDEMP, **María Paz Mancilla Gamboa**. On 8 March 2007 an attempted attack by unidentified gunmen reportedly looking for Martha Cecilia Díaz in Floridablanca was foiled by private security guards.

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 education, health and public service unions 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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