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Colombia: Killing of the son of a murdered human rights defender denotes a lack of comprehensive protection of rights defenders and their families

Amnesty International condemns the murder of Javier Bernardo Cuero Ortíz, son of Bernardo Cuero Bravo, on 19 March 2018 in the city of Tumaco, southern Colombia. His brother Silvio Dubán Ortíz was also killed during the events.

Javier Bernardo and his family were sitting outside of a relative's store, when two unidentified individuals approached them on a motorcycle and fired directly at them, killing them both and wounding one more person. Amnesty International has received reports that the murderers aimed directly at Cuero's relatives, a sign that it was a planned event and that the rest of the family could still be at risk.

The murder of Javier Bernardo took place just nine months after the murder of his father Bernardo Cuero, human rights defender and victims' leader of the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) in June 2017. The murders occurred just weeks after the trial hearing set to press charges against the perpetrators of the crime, and there is evidence regarding the intellectual perpetrators of this crime.

Bernardo Cuero requested protection measures for him and his family from the Colombian state on numerous occasions. The protection measures were denied.

The vulnerability and lack of protection faced by human rights defenders and their families in Colombia is critical. In 2017, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recorded 441 attacks, including 121 murders. As of 19 March 2018 there have been more than 20 killings.

It is imperative that the Colombian government provides a clear and effective response that guarantees the comprehensive protection of defenders and social leaders in Colombia, which goes beyond police measures that have proved to be insufficient for individuals, their families and the communities they represent. Specifically, the Colombian government must develop and implement urgent measures to guarantee the protection of members of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples which are jointly agreed upon, with primary inputs from consultations with community leaders and representative organizations.

Likewise, judicial investigations concerning cases of killings and threats to defenders and their families, must be carried out in an effective and impartial manner so that all those responsible, including intellectual and materials perpetrators, are brought to justice. If urgent measures are not taken in regards to the situation of human rights defenders, civil society space will shrink further and violations of their human rights will continue, thus hindering the implementation of a stable and lasting peace in Colombia.