

UA 278/96

Fear for safety / Fear of refoulement

28 November 1996

COLOMBIA /  
PANAMARefugee peasant farmers of the Urabá region, deported or  
facing deportation from Panama  
Internally displaced peasant farmers fleeing from Urabá

The repatriation of 88 Colombian refugees, who fled to Panama a week ago to escape from political violence in north-west Colombia, has raised fears for their safety and that of over 200 other refugees still facing deportation by the Panamanian authorities.

According to reports, a group of some 400 peasant farmers and their families, mostly from Unguía, Chocó Department<sup>1</sup>, fled to Panama after violence broke out between leftist guerrillas and right wing paramilitary units operating in the region. On arrival in Panama, the refugees set up improvised camps in the province of Darién, but as soon as the Panamanian authorities became aware of their presence they organized their return to Colombia in collaboration with the Colombian Air Force, which provided an aeroplane and returned the first group on 23 November.

A largenumber of those who fled the violence are women, elderly people and children. The group of 88 refugees deported on 23 November included 32 minors. After their repatriation from Panama, the refugees were housed in the *Hogar Juvenil de Apartadó*, Apartadó's Children's Home, where conditions are said to be cramped and unsanitary. Rural and urban areas of Apartadó are also currently experiencing a high level of paramilitary violence.

In addition to those who fled to Panama, at least 75 peasant farmer families are said to have arrived at the urban centre of Apartadó over the weekend (23-24 November), trying to escape from the violence in Urabá.

Amnesty International calls on the authorities of Panama and Colombia to take into account the very serious threat to the lives of the refugees from Urabá, to accept their status as refugees, and to cooperate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to ensure their safety, in line with their obligations under international law.

The Colombian Government should ensure that the 88 refugees already returned to Colombia by the Panamanian authorities, as well as other internally displaced peasant farmers reportedly fleeing the violence, are protected from human rights violations and receive all necessary humanitarian assistance.

In view of the growing violence in the Urabá region, and the possible increase in the numbers of people fleeing to Panamanian territory and other areas, Amnesty International calls on both governments to cooperate with the UNHCR, and take all necessary steps to protect the lives and well-being of the Colombian refugees. Both governments should respond to any specific recommendations made by the UNHCR.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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<sup>1</sup>The area of Urabá in north western Colombia covers parts of the departments of Chocó, Antioquia and Córdoba.

The escalating political violence in the Urabá region between the Colombian armed forces, their paramilitary allies and three armed opposition groups has claimed the lives of many civilians. Of the hundreds of victims in recent months, the vast majority have been civilians pressured to support rival armed groups. The Colombian government has done nothing to protect the civilian population. In one of the latest incidents, on 23 November, army-backed paramilitary members are said to have shot five people dead in Apartadó. It has also been reported that at least four peasant farmers were killed last week by suspected left-wing guerrillas.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send urgent appeals in Spanish or in your own language, including as many as possible of the following points:**

To the Panamanian Authorities

- expressing your grave concern at the *refoulement* to Colombia of 88 refugees, and calling for the immediate end of the *refoulement* of refugees from Panama to Colombia;
- reminding the authorities of Panama's obligation under the internationally recognized principle of *non-refoulement*, not to forcibly return anyone to a country where he or she would be at risk of serious human rights violations, referring to Article 33 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Panama is a state party;
- urging the Panamanian authorities to take all appropriate and necessary steps to ensure the safety of the 88 Colombian refugees who were *refouled* to Colombia on 23 November;
- seeking clarification from the Panamanian authorities as to their reasons for repatriating the 88 refugees to the extremely volatile Urabá region, and expressing particular concern that the Panamanian authorities organized the repatriation with the cooperation of the Colombian Air Force.

To the Colombian Authorities

- calling on the Colombian authorities to ensure that the 88 refugees returned from Panama, in addition to other internally displaced peasant farmers fleeing the violence in Urabá, are protected from serious human rights violations and receive adequate assistance;
- asking that the reception conditions for these refugees and displaced persons be humane and that the Colombian authorities monitor their safety in conjunction with the UNHCR;
- calling on the Colombian authorities to address the root causes of the recent violence in Urabá, which has killed many peasant farmers and caused others to flee.

*Please bring to the attention of the Refugee Coordinator in your Section.*

**APPEALS TO:**

President of the Republic of Panama

S.E. Ernesto Pérez Balladares

Presidente de la República

Palacio Presidencial

Valija 50, Panamá 1, PANAMA

**Telegrams: Presidente Balladares, Panamá**

**Telex: 2770 PRESIPA PG**

**Fax: +507 227 0076**

**Salutation: Sr. Presidente/Dear President**

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Panama

Sr. Gabriel Lewis Galindo  
 Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores  
 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores  
 C. 34 Plaza Porras, Panamá 4, PANAMA  
**Telegrams: Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, Panamá**  
**Telex: 2771 EXTPAN PG**  
**Fax: +507 227 0013 VOICE asking you to press fax button**  
**Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister**

President of the Republic of Colombia  
 Señor Presidente Ernesto Samper Pizano  
 Presidente de la República  
 Palacio de Nariño  
 Carrera 8 No. 7-26  
 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA  
**Telegrams: President Samper Pizano, Bogotá, Colombia**  
**Telexes: 44281 PALP CO**  
**Fax: + 57 1 289 3377/286 7434/287 7939**  
**Salutation:Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Samper**

Minister of the Interior, Colombia  
 Dr. Horacio Serpa Uribe  
 Ministro del Interior  
 Ministerio del Interior  
 Carrera 8, No.8-09, Piso 2  
 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA  
**Telegrams: Ministro del Interior Serpa, Bogotá, Colombia**  
**Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO**  
**Fax: + 57 1 281 5884/286 0053**  
**Salutation:Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister**

**COPIES TO:**

Grupo de Apoyo a Organizaciones de Desplazados  
 Apartado aéreo 25916, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia; **fax: +571 287 9089**

Centro de Investigación de los Derechos Humanos y Socorro Jurídico de Panamá,  
 Apartado Postal 10215, Panamá 4, Panamá; **fax: +507 2 264 6529**

and to diplomatic representatives of Colombia accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 2 January 1996.