

EXTERNAL

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Fear for safety

8 January 1998

COLOMBIAMario Humberto Calixto, human rights activist

Members of Comité de Derechos Humanos de Sabana de Torres

At 6pm on 23 December 1997 two armed men attempted to abduct Mario Humberto Calixto at gunpoint from his home in the town of Sabana de Torres, department of Santander. He narrowly escaped and remains in hiding. There is serious concern for his safety as well as for the safety of other members of the *Comité de Derechos Humanos de Sabana de Torres*, the local human rights group of which Mario Humberto Calixto is president.

The two assailants entered the house holding pistols demanding to speak to Mario Humberto Calixto. They were prevented from abducting or killing him by the presence of two foreign volunteers from Peace Brigades International (PBI), an international organization which provides accompaniment to human rights activists to help guarantee their safety. The PBI volunteers managed to put themselves between Mario Humberto Calixto and the two armed men, enabling him to escape from the back of the house.

According to reports, Mario Humberto Calixto received repeated death threats from paramilitary groups active in the region after the *Comité de Derechos Humanos de Sabana de Torres* published a report in November 1997 on the human rights violations in the area. Members of a paramilitary group are reported to have said: "A Mario le vamos a matar. Si no es en estos días, en diciembre" ("We're going to kill Mario. If not in the next few days, in December"). On 22 November a vehicle carrying five people suspected of involvement in recent extrajudicial killings in the area was seen repeatedly passing Mario Humberto Calixto's house.

There is serious concern for the safety of other members the *Comité de Derechos Humanos de Sabana de Torres* who remain in the region.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Recent months have seen the armed conflict intensify between armed opposition groups and the military and their paramilitary allies. Members of the civilian population have been the principle victims in the escalating violence. According to reports, since July 1997 14 people have "disappeared" in the municipality of Sabana de Torres, 10 of whose bodies have subsequently been discovered. Many members of the rural population of the municipality have been forced to seek safety in Sabana de Torres town.

In recent years Amnesty International has received numerous reports of human rights violations against the civilian population of Sabana de Torres committed by paramilitary groups operating with the support of the armed forces. The civilian population has lodged numerous official complaints denouncing the close links between the armed forces and paramilitary groups. Guerrilla groups have also been responsible for frequent abuses of human rights in the area, including deliberate and arbitrary killings.

Despite repeated government pledges to protect human rights, members of the Colombian and security forces together with their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious abuses with virtual impunity. President Ernesto Samper Pizano has repeatedly promised to improve the human rights situation. His

promises include a commitment to dismantle paramilitary forces. However, no effective steps have so far been taken to control their actions and to hold members accountable for serious and widespread human rights violations.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in SPANISH or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of Mario Humberto Calixto and other members of the *Comité de Derechos Humanos de Sabana de Torres*;
- calling for all appropriate steps to be taken to guarantee the physical safety of those at risk;
- urging that immediate steps are taken to dismantle paramilitary groups and bring those members of the group responsible for human rights violations to justice;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the municipality of Sabana de Torres and urging that members of the security forces responsible for supporting and participating in such groups be brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

President 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

Faxes: + 57 1 284 21 86/289 3377/286 7434

Salutation:Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Samper

Attorney General

Dr.Alfonso Gómez Méndez
 Fiscal General de la Nación
 Fiscalía General de la Nación
 Diagonal 22B 5201
 Apartado Aéreo 29855
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams:Fiscal General, Fiscalía General, Bogotá, Colombia

Faxes:+ 571 570 2000 (ext 2017) - when ansaphone picks up dial 2017 for fax

Salutation: Estimado Dr.Gómez /Dear Dr. Gómez

Minister of Defence

Dr.Gilberto Echeverri Mejía
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO

Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874

Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

CREDHOS, AA 505, Barrancabermeja, Santander, Colombia

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 26 February 1998.