

News Service: 021/99
AI INDEX: AMR 23/05/99
29 January 1999

Colombia: Prompt action from the Colombian authorities is essential - the lives of four human rights defenders are at risk

The kidnapping of the four leaders from the *Instituto Popular de Capacitación (IPC)*, Popular Training Institute, on 28 January in Medellín is yet a further example of the current systematic strategy designed to silence Colombian human rights defenders, Amnesty International said today.

The organization has appealed to the Colombian authorities to take, as a matter of urgency, all necessary measures to guarantee the lives and personal safety - as well as the eventual release - of Jairo Bedoya, Jorge Salazar, Claudia Tamayo and Olga Rodas.

“In December last year, President Andrés Pastrana, in presenting his human rights policy to the United Nations in New York, recognized the need to strengthen programs to protect the lives, safety and dignity of human rights defenders,” Amnesty International stated.

“This commitment was reaffirmed only yesterday in Geneva in a meeting between the Colombian Vice-President, Gustavo Bell, and the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Pierre Sané - the same day on which the four IPC employees were kidnapped.”

Amnesty International has repeatedly condemned the constant attacks on human rights defenders in Colombia. The international community has witnessed, with increasing horror and indignation, how Colombian human rights defenders have been subjected to what, to all intents and purposes, is a systematic campaign aimed at silencing them and destroying their work.

“The commitment given by President Andrés Pastrana to the United Nations and reaffirmed yesterday in Geneva by the Colombian Vice-President must not remain as empty rhetoric,” the organization stressed. “What is at risk at this time is the physical safety, perhaps even the lives, of four human beings whom the Colombian Government has a responsibility to protect.”

Case background

According to reports, on 28 January several armed persons entered the Medellín headquarters of the IPC, a non-governmental human rights organization, and after shutting all those present into an office, took away Jairo Bedoya, the director, and three employees: Jorge Salazar, in charge of human rights and peace; Claudia Tamayo, the director of development and governability; and Olga Rodas, the administrative manager. Two computers were also taken from the Institute.

For many years human rights defenders have been victims of a persistent campaign of harassment and intimidation, ranging from repeated death threats to arbitrary detention and from “disappearance” to coldblooded killing. ENDS.../