

EXTRA 39/95

Fear for Safety

31 March 1995

COLOMBIA **Relatives of victims of the Pueblo Bello massacre**
Human rights workers and forensic scientists taking part in exhumation of bodies

The exhumation of corpses, believed to be of peasant farmers "disappeared" from the village of Pueblo Bello, municipality of Turbo, department of Antioquia, has just begun at Montería cemetery, near Pueblo Bello. There is serious concern for the safety of the relatives, human rights workers and forensic scientists present at the exhumation, which is scheduled to continue until 7 April 1995.

On the evening of 14 January 1990, 43 people "disappeared" from the village of Pueblo Bello. According to witnesses, a squad of armed men, some in military uniform, others hooded and in plain clothes, raided the village and seized 40 men from their homes or from local streets and bars. Others were seized from the local Presbyterian church. The captured men were made to lie face down in the village square while their hands were tied behind their backs. They were then forced onto two trucks which had earlier been hijacked by the armed squad; the three drivers were also taken. The trucks drove towards the town of San Pedro de Urabá. Eye-witnesses saw them passing through two army check-points, although for several years a night curfew had banned all civilian vehicles from circulating between 6pm and 6am.

Official investigations established that the 43 men had been abducted by a paramilitary group headed by a known drug-trafficker and ranch owner, Fidel Castaño Gil. In collaboration with regional army commanders, Fidel Castaño and his paramilitaries are believed to be responsible for a series of brutal massacres in north-west Colombia during the late 1980s. After hearing the testimony of a deserter from the paramilitary group, judicial and police authorities searched two ranches belonging to Fidel Castaño in Córdoba department where they found nine unmarked graves. The graves contained 24 bodies showing signs of torture; 20 of these were believed to be some of the men from Pueblo Bello. However, only six were positively identified. The remains of the other 18 were placed in plastic bags and reburied as "NN" (No Name). Despite repeated requests by relatives and their lawyers, no further efforts were made to trace the missing men or to identify the bodies until now.

Several civilians arrested in connection with the mass "disappearance" were released on a technicality. Arrest warrants against Fidel Castaño for this and other massacres have not been carried out. In July 1990, Dr María Ester Restrepo Quiceno, the Regional Procurator for Urabá, who was in charge of the administrative investigation into the Pueblo Bello case, was killed together with her bodyguard by two men carrying automatic weapons.

Since 1990, intimidation, extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" perpetrated by paramilitary groups, working in collaboration and with the acquiescence of the security forces, have continued to increase in this region. There is serious concern that those attending the exhumation will be intimidated or become victims of "disappearance" or extrajudicial execution in order to protect the long-running impunity of those responsible for the Pueblo Bello "disappearances".

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Over recent years members of the security forces and their paramilitary allies have been responsible for human rights violations and have continued to commit serious abuses with virtual impunity. President Ernesto Samper Pizano has made repeated promises, both during his election campaign and since taking office in August 1994, to improve the human rights situation. His promises include a commitment to dismantle paramilitary forces and to tackle the impunity which has protected those responsible for human rights violations, including those responsible for the Pueblo Bello massacre.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of those attending and carrying out the exhumation of victims of the Pueblo Bello massacre, including relatives of the victims, human rights workers and forensic investigators;
- urging the authorities to undertake all measures necessary to guarantee the safety of those present at the exhumation at Montería cemetery;
- urging that immediate action is taken to arrest Fidel Castaño;
- urging that immediate action is taken to eradicate paramilitary groups operating in the region, a move which would be in line with stated governmental human rights policy.

APPEALS TO

President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente Ernesto Samper Pizano
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: President Samper Pizano, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 44281 PALP CO

Faxes: + 57 1 286 7434

Salutation:Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Samper

Procurator General:

Dr. Orlando Vásquez Velásquez
 Procurador General de la Nación
 Procuraduría General
 Edificio Banco Ganadero
 Carrera 5, No. 15-80
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Procurador General Vasquez, Bogotá, Colombia

Faxes:+ 57 1 342 9723/281 7531

Salutation:Sr. Procurador de la Nación/Dear Dr. Vásquez

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Horacio Serpa Uribe
 Ministro de Gobierno
 Ministerio de Gobierno
 Carrera 8a, No.8-09, Piso 7
 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Telegrams: Ministro de Gobierno Serpa, Bogota, Colombia

Telexes:45406 MINGO CO

Faxes:+ 57 1 284 0214

Salutation:Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

Minister of Defence

Dr. Fernando Botero Zea

Ministro de Defensa Nacional

Ministerio de Defensa Nacional

Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52

Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa Botero, Bogota, Colombia**Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO****Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874/288 4906****Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister****COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:**Association for Relatives of the "Disappeared"

Señores

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Santafé de Bogotá, 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 31 April 1995.