

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 23/017/2001

UA 38/01

Fear for Safety / Death Threats

9 February 2001

COLOMBIA

Peace Brigades International
Jackeline Rojas, human rights activist with the *Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)*
Other OFP members

Army-backed paramilitaries have declared an international organization a "military target" after threatening both one of its members and a women's grass roots organization it accompanies in Colombia.

In the early morning of 8 February, two armed men, who said they belonged to the paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)*, United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia, came to a women's community centre run by the *Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)*, Popular Women's Organization, in the city of Barrancabermeja. The men went straight to an international observer from the non-governmental organization Peace Brigades International (PBI), who are accompanying OFP members in immediate danger, and ordered him to hand over his official papers and mobile phone. When he refused, the paramilitaries threatened him with a gun. He and Jackeline Rojas, an OFP activist, therefore handed over their papers and mobile phones. When leaving the centre, the paramilitary gunmen threatened the international observer, declaring PBI a "military target" ("*a partir de ahora usted es objetivo militar de las Autodefensas*").

Since 1994, PBI has been invited by the Colombian government to maintain a team of international observers in Barrancabermeja. The organization protects human rights activists by physically accompanying those at risk. It provides protective accompaniment to the OFP, an internationally backed organization working with displaced communities in the Magdalena Medio region, which came under paramilitary threat in January (see UA 22/01, AMR 23/008/01, 29 January 2001).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is concerned that despite a heavy security force presence in Barrancabermeja, where a special forces unit was deployed in January, paramilitary forces have apparently been able to operate unhindered. A paramilitary, who was arrested for threatening workers at the OFP centre on 27 January, was released only two days later. Also, the paramilitaries are reported to have set up checkpoints and to have killed several people in recent weeks. Although the precise location of these checkpoints have been reported to the security forces, they have taken no action to confront the paramilitaries.

Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. Paramilitary groups have killed several thousand civilians over the past five years. The Colombian government suspended the constitutional legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the armed forces to combat and disband such groups in 1989, yet they continue to work with the support of the security forces in many areas of the country.

The security forces and their paramilitary allies have a policy of labeling human rights activists as guerrilla collaborators or supporters, so they can present them as legitimate targets in the counter-insurgency war. Human rights activists in Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio region have suffered continuous threats and harassment for carrying out their legitimate work to promote and protect internationally recognized human rights. In the past they have been the subject of death threats, killings and disappearances at the hands of the security forces and their paramilitary allies. Many have been killed and others have been forced to leave the region in fear for their lives. The Colombian authorities have so far failed to take action against paramilitary groups operating in the region.

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

- expressing concern that army-backed paramilitaries have intimidated and threatened a Peace Brigades International observer and workers of the *Organización Femenina Popular*;
- urging the Colombian authorities to take appropriate measures to guarantee their safety;
- calling for an immediate, impartial and full investigation to be carried out into the threats, with those responsible to be brought to justice;
- expressing concern that even though a much publicized special forces unit was recently sent into Barrancabermeja, ostensibly to combat paramilitary forces, no decisive action has been taken against paramilitary forces in the city, whose whereabouts have been reported to the authorities;
- reminding the Colombian government to adhere to its obligations regarding human rights defenders, as laid out in United Nations (UN) and Organization of American States (OAS) declarations, and urging it to adhere to repeated recommendations made by the UN to the Colombian government to take measures to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the area, urging that the results are made public, and that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana Arango
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
 Carrera 8 No.7-26
 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Fax: + 57 1 336 2109 / 337 1351

Salutation: Dear President / Excmo. Sr. Presidente

Vice-President of the Republic

Señor Vicepresidente Gustavo Bell Lemus
 Alto Consejero Presidencial para asuntos de Derechos Humanos y lucha Contra la Corrupción
 Cra. 8 #7-26, Palacio de Nariño,
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Faxes: + 57 1 337 1350 / 337 1351

Salutation: Excmo. Sr. Vicepresidente / Dear Vice-President

Minister of Defence

Dr. Luis Fernando Ramírez Acuña
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegram: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

Telex: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO

Fax: + 57 1 222 1874

Salutation: Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro

Governor of Santander Department

Gobernador del Departamento de Santander
 Sr. Jorge Eliecer Gómez Villamizar
 Gobernación de Santander
 Calle 37, No. 10-30
 Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia

Faxes: +57 76 339889

Salutation: Dear Governor / Sr. Gobernador

COPIES TO:

Women's grassroots organization
Organización Femenina Popular
Cra 22 No 52B - 36
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 23 March 2001.