

PUBLIC

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UA 82/00

Fear for Safety

13 April 2000

COLOMBIA

Pablo Javier Arenales
Other human rights defenders with the *Corporación Regional de Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS)*, Regional Human Rights Corporation

Human rights activist Pablo Javier Arenales has received a telephone death threat, apparently from a paramilitary group. Amnesty International is gravely concerned for his safety and that of other human rights activists in the region where he works.

This is the second telephone death threat Pablo Javier Arenales has received since armed men believed to be paramilitaries attempted to kill him a year ago. In March 1999 two gunmen came looking for him at a restaurant where he was eating, and he escaped by hiding in a back room.

Pablo Javier Arenales works with the *Corporación Regional de Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS)*, Regional Human Rights Corporation, in Barrancabermeja, Santander Department. On 9 April at 8pm he received a call from a man who said he was from a paramilitary force called the *Autodefensas del Magdalena Medio*, Self-defence Forces of the Middle Magdalena Region. The man said Pablo Javier Arenales would be killed unless he left the area within 24 hours.

Paramilitary activity in Barrancabermeja and the surrounding area has increased markedly in recent weeks. This has heightened Amnesty International's concern for the safety of human rights activists working with CREDHOS and other NGOs. At least 14 people were killed last month in the nearby municipality of Yondó, Antioquia Department, in what were reported to be paramilitary attacks (see UA 81/00, 10 April, AMR 23/19/00). Several of these attacks were directed at peasant farmer leaders and community leaders.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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 labelling human rights organizations as guerrilla collaborators or supporters, so they can present them as legitimate targets in the counter-insurgency war. Over 25 human rights defenders have been killed or "disappeared" in the last three years. Some armed opposition groups also refuse to respect the legitimacy and independence of organisations which belong to civil society.

Human rights defenders working with CREDHOS and other non-governmental organizations in Barrancabermeja and the Middle Magdalena region have suffered continuous threats and harassment for carrying out their legitimate work to promote and protect human rights in accordance with internationally recognized standards. Many have been killed and others have been forced to leave the region in fear for their lives.

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

- expressing concern received a death threat on 9 April to human rights defender Pablo Javier Arenales and urging a full investigation, with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- urging that immediate measures be taken to guarantee the safety of *Corporación Regional de Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS)* members, and to ensure they can continue

to carry out their work of promoting and protecting human rights in accordance with international human rights standards;

- urging the Colombian government to adhere to its obligations regarding human rights defenders, as laid out in the UN *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* adopted on 9 December 1998, and the Organization of American States *Human Rights Defenders in the Americas* resolution adopted on 7 June 1999 [AG/RES. 1671 (XXIX-O/99)];
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in Barrancabermeja and the surrounding area, urging that the results are made public and those found responsible for supporting and participating in such groups be brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments and UN recommendations.

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 1 286 7434/287 7939/284 2186/289 3377

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

Fax: + 57 1 337 1351

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

Minister of Interior

Dr. Nestor Humberto Martínez
 Ministro del Interior
 Ministerio del Interior
 Palacio Echeverry
 Carrera 8a, No.8-09, piso 2o.
 Santafé de Bogotá
 COLOMBIA

Fax: + 57 1 286 8025

Salutation: Dear Sir / Sr. Ministro

COPIES TO:

Credhos
 A.A 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 25 May 2000.