

UA 46/01

Death Thru

**COLOMBIA**Omar VERA LUNA, community leader  
His family  
Other community leaders in Barrancabermeja city

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Army-backed paramilitaries have threatened to kill a community leader and his family, following his refusal to participate in paramilitary-organized protests. Amnesty International is concerned for their safety.

On 18 February paramilitary gunmen visited Omar Vera Luna's home in the city of Barrancabermeja, Santander department, on at least three occasions. International observers were present at the time, and Omar Vera Luna and his family suffered no immediate harm.

Omar Vera Luna's name appeared on a paramilitary death list, which was circulated in the area on 16 February. On 17 February, he was detained at a paramilitary-roadblock. His release was only secured when human rights activists and international Church authorities appealed to the police to take action. It is not known if any paramilitaries were arrested in connection with his unlawful detention.

Omar Vera Luna is the president of the *Junta de Acción Comunal*, Local Community Organization, a Barrancabermeja based organization which works with residents in the Villarelys district. He has been refusing to participate in paramilitary protests objecting at the planned demilitarization of a nearby zone, which is meant to facilitate peace talks between the government and a guerrilla group. Other Barrancabermeja community leaders have reportedly been forced to participate in the protests, along with the communities they represent. In recent days, communities in the neighbouring department of Antioquia have reportedly also been forced to participate in the demonstrations, and local people have been forced to set up road blocks.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In the first month of 2001, the United Nations Human Rights Office in Colombia received information of 26 massacres committed in 11 departments, in which more than 170 people have been killed, most of them by paramilitary groups.

There has been an increased presence of paramilitary forces in Barrancabermeja since December 2000 (See UA 340/00, AMR 23/90/00, 6 November 2000 and follow-up). Despite a heavy security force presence in the area, paramilitary forces have apparently been able to operate unhindered, and 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.

In 1998, a paramilitary raid on Barrancabermeja, during which seven people were killed and 25 "disappeared", drew international condemnation. (See *Barrancabermeja: A City under Siege*, AI Index: AMR 23/36/99, May 1999 for details of this and other attacks on the city). The UN has repeatedly recommended that the Colombian government take action to combat and dismantle paramilitary groups. However, the authorities have failed to take effective action against either the paramilitary groups operating in the region, or the elements within the security forces who collaborate with them. On the contrary, members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue

to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. As recent events have shown, official inaction continues to leave civilians at risk.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Omar Vera Luna and his family, who have come under paramilitary threat, urging the authorities to guarantee their safety;
- expressing concern at reports that other Barrancabermeja community leaders and locals in Antioquia Department have also been threatened after refusing to participate in paramilitary-organized protests;
- expressing concern that the government failed to stop paramilitary attacks in the Barrancabermeja area, despite their own commitments and UN recommendations to combat and dismantle these groups;
- 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;
- urging the authorities to take immediate and decisive action to combat and dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with repeated government commitments and United Nations 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 1 336 2109 / 337 1351**

**Salutation: Dear President / Excmo. Sr. Presidente**

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**

Minister of Foreign Relations

Dr. Guillermo Fernández de Soto  
 Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores  
 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Palacio San Carlos  
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

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**Salutation: Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro**

**COPIES TO:**

*Corporación Colectivo de Abogados 'José Alvear Restrepo'*

Apartado Aéreo 33035  
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 3 April 2001.