

COLOMBIA

Extrajudicial Killings, "Disappearances", Death Threats and Other Political Violence in the Department of Sucre

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of popular activists and local opposition party political activists, teachers, peasant farmers and former guerrillas belonging to the legal parties *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* (CRS) - Current of Socialist Renewal, *Esperanza, Paz y Libertad* (EPL) - Hope, Peace and Liberty and the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (PRT) - Revolutionary Workers Party, in the northern department of Sucre following a spate of extrajudicial executions, "disappearances" and death threats in recent months. An intensification of guerrilla actions in the region in recent months has heightened concerns for the safety of members of grassroots and political organizations. The security forces and their paramilitary allies often consider such grassroots organizations to be subversive and sympathetic to guerrilla organization's objectives.

In the first 110 days of 1996 some 137 people are believed to have been the victims of killings perpetrated by the security forces and paramilitary groups operating with their support in the region. The number of killings committed by members of the security forces and paramilitary groups appear to be continuing unabated. Many peasant farmer families have been displaced from their homes and have fled to the departmental capital, Sincelejo.

Sucre - a recent history of political violence against grassroots organizations and political activists

The recent spate of political violence in the department of Sucre is not a new development. Over recent years many popular activists, teachers and peasant farmers have been among the victims of human rights violations committed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies.

Reforms contained in the 1991 Colombian Constitution which encouraged greater participation in the electoral process led to the development of many civic and popular movements throughout Colombia. In Sucre amongst the civic organizations which were created were a number of *Comités Cívicos* - Civic Committees or *Movimientos Cívicos* - Civic Movements which were set up in several municipalities of the department of Sucre to participate in local elections and break the traditional political hegemony of the Colombian Liberal and Conservative Parties. Amongst the activists joining and supporting these civic movements are demobilized guerrillas belonging to the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (PRT) - Revolutionary Workers Party and the *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* (CRS) - Current of Socialist Renewal, a splinter group from the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) - National Liberation Army. The PRT demobilized after signing peace agreements with the Colombian Government in 1990 whilst the CRS demobilized after signing a peace agreement with the Government in 1994. Members of these movements have been amongst those sectors who have been the particular target of human rights violations in the department of Sucre.

In five municipalities of the department of Sucre, Tolú, Sincé, San Pedro, San Benito y Sampués, *Comités Pro Revocatoria del Mandato* - Committees for the Dismissal of Mayors have been set up since 1994. These committees have campaigned for the dismissals of the mayors in these municipalities, on the basis of allegations of corruption and misuse of public funds. Since their formation, many of the members of these committees have been under threat.

Landholding is highly concentrated in the department of Sucre. Powerful landowning interests hold large tracts of land leaving peasant farmer families either landless or with poor land-holdings. Much political violence has centered on the issue of land possession with landless peasant farmers campaigning to acquire land-holdings or invading land. Many peasant farmer families have been the victim of human rights violations in the region and have been forced to flee their homes and land. This has benefitted large land-owning interests in the region wishing to increase their land-holdings and secure possession of abandoned lands.

Another sector which has been the particular target of human rights violations in recent years is the teaching profession. In November 1995, the *Asociación de Educadores de Sucre* (ADES) - Sucre Association of Teachers, presented a list of teachers who were under threat to the *Comité Departamental de Amenazados* - Departmental Committee of Teachers under Threat¹. The list included the names of nineteen teachers who had been forced to leave the region, 27 names of teachers who were reportedly named on a "death list" and the names of a further seven people also under serious threat. Teachers in the region face threats both from paramilitary groups and guerrilla forces in the region. Adolfo Tirado, a member of ADES' executive board stated that it would be "*falso decir que son los profesores de izquierda los que están amenazados, también lo están los de derecha y quienes se mantienen al margen de la política*" - "it would be wrong to believe that left-wing teachers were the only ones under threat, those to the right are also under threat as well as those who keep away from politics".

Recent cases of human rights violation in the department of Sucre

The following are a number of cases of human rights violations in the department of Sucre on which Amnesty International has received information.

On 15 January a group of armed men forced their way into the house of **Jaime Antonio Blanquiceth Jaramillo**, a 28-year-old peasant farmer living in Majagual, and killed him with three shots. On the same day a group of armed men indiscriminately opened fire on the home of **Eduardo Navarro Beleño**, a 23-year-old peasant farmer, injuring him, 19-year-old **Ana Francisca Beleño**, and two children who were in the house situated in the community of Palmar, municipality of Majagual.

¹ The Committee of Teachers Under Threat - reviews the security of teachers who have been threatened or been victims to attempts on their lives for political reasons and considers their redeployment to other parts of Colombia or the department of Sucre. The Committee operates under the auspices of the *Procuraduría General de la Nación* - Office of the Procurator-General.

On 19 January several heavily armed men wearing armed forces issue clothing, arrived in the community of Toluviejo and went to **Rafael Peñate Cabrales'** home and killed him shooting him twice in the head. Rafael Peñate was an 18-year-old peasant farmer. After killing Rafael Peñate, the armed men reportedly went to the community of Caracolí and killed **Roberto Montes Vergara**, shooting him three times in the head.

Juan Antonio Solano Suárez, a 22-year-old peasant farmer, was killed with one shot to the head in Tolú on 28 January by six heavily armed men wearing armed-forces-issue uniforms with one shot to the head.

Abelardo Méndez Paternina, a peasant farmer, was killed in Toluviejo on 31 January by several armed men who shot him in the throat.

On 4 February several heavily armed men entered the community of Don Gabriel, municipality of Chalán, and reportedly abducted four peasant farmers. Three of these were subsequently released whilst a fourth, **Ramiro Merlano Díaz**, aged 24, was killed with six shots to the body. Whilst press reports blamed guerrillas belonging to the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, armed opposition group, local inhabitants claimed that a paramilitary group was to blame for Ramiro Merlano's death.

On 6 February **Jorge Padilla Zúñiga** a 25-year-old peasant farmer was killed in Tolú, by several armed individuals travelling in a truck. Jorge Padilla was injured at first and then killed with three shots to the head as he lay wounded.

On 14 February, **Alfredo Alvarado Esalas**, a councillor in the Santiago de Tolú, town council was killed by two unidentified men who shot him eight times. Alfredo Alvarado's wife was injured in this attack. Prior to his death Alfredo Alvarado had received death threats and had survived a previous attempt on his life.

On 15 February, 20-year-old **Enrique Acosta**, was forcibly abducted by several heavily armed men who were travelling in an unmarked vehicle, from his home in the Kennedy district of Sincelejo. Since his abduction his whereabouts remain unknown.

Alvaro Santander Paternina Martínez, was killed in Colosó by several gunmen with four shots to the head on 25 February. Alvaro Santander was a teacher working at the *Colegio Nacionalizado Víctor Zúñiga* - Víctor Zúñiga Nationalized School in the municipality of Colosó and is the second teacher from this school to have been killed. Two other teachers working at this school are currently facing death threats.

On 27 February, **Marlene Pelufo Teherán**, aged 34, and her daughter were injured in an attack on their home in the municipality of Chalán by a group of unidentified gunmen. Local inhabitants claimed that *escuadrones de la muerte* - "Death Squads", were responsible for the attack and other recent attacks in the neighbourhood.

Manuel de Jesús Vides Pineda, aged 49, was killed in San Benito Abad on 17 March by several armed men wearing civilian clothing who identified themselves as belonging to a paramilitary group calling itself *Escuadrón de la Muerte* - "Death Squad".

The body of the former mayor of Chalán, **César González**, who was working as a bus driver on the route between Sincelejo and Chalán, was found in San Antonio de Palmito, municipality of Colosó on 25 March. Two days previously he had reportedly been abducted by a group of armed men wearing hoods, who had stopped the bus he was driving, forced the passengers to alight and lie on the ground and had proceeded to bind César González and abduct him. Witnesses state that a paramilitary group operating in the region was responsible for César González's abduction and murder. One witness stated that: "*profesores de Colosó denunciaron la presencia de personas extrañas en la vía, ... requisan a los pasajeros y a algunos se los llevan, como pasó con el chófer del jeep, quien apareció muerto dos días después*" - "Colosó teachers have denounced the presence of unknown people on the road, ... they search the passengers and take some of them away as happened to the driver of the jeep who was found dead two days later".

Eduardo Barbosa, a peasant farmer was killed near the town of San Onofre on the same day by three armed men also on 25 March.

On 27 March, **Jairo Pérez Mier**, a demobilized EPL guerrilla and leader of the *Movimiento Cívico Popular Independiente* - Independent Civic Popular Movement, was killed at his home in central Sincelejo with several shots to the head by a number of gunmen.

Alfonso Beltrán Chamorro, a member of the *Movimiento Nueva Colombia* - New Colombia Movement and Chalán town councillor was killed together with his wife **Yermis Merlano**, headmistress of the Chalán school and former Secretary of Education on the Chalán town council, on 31 March, by a group of men wearing army uniforms who identified themselves as members of the army. On the same day six heavily armed men forcibly entered the house of **José María Florez Hernández** and killed him with one shot to the forehead in front of his family. José María Florez worked in the *Unidad Municipal de Atención Técnica y Agrícola* (UMATA) - Municipal Technical and Agricultural Advisory Unit and was president of the *Asociación de Padres de Familia* - Association of Fathers. The paramilitary group also reportedly threatened several teachers in Chalán and beat the Director of the *Núcleo de Chalán* - Chalán Educational Nucleus, **Orlay Lázaro** and abducted **Jairo Sierra**, a tradesman who was subsequently found dead with clear signs of torture.

Luis Miguel Vergara de León was killed on 2 April. He was a deputy to the Sucre Departmental Assembly for the *Movimiento Cívico Popular Independiente* - Independent Popular Civic Movement, former mayor of Corozal, founder of the *Nuevo Sucre* and *Costa Alternativa* newspapers and was heading an initiative by Civic Committees and Movements in the region to put forward socio-economic alternatives at regional and national level. Luis Miguel Vergara was shot nine times by a group of armed men travelling in an unmarked vehicle, near to his home in Sincelejo.

Nelson Escorcía Imbreth, a political leader, a demobilized guerrilla of the EPL and a Tolúviejo town councillor representing the *Esperanza, Paz y Libertad* (EPL) - Hope, Peace and Liberty Party,

was killed on 9 April by two armed men who shot him seven times at his house in the Los Pioneros district of Sincelejo. Until they were withdrawn several months before his assassination, Nelson Escorcia had been provided with armed escorts.

Increasing Paramilitary and Security Force Presence in Sucre

Responsibility for individual killings is often difficult to establish. However, an escalation of political violence coincided with an increased presence of paramilitary groups operating in the region and the increase of security forces' presence in Sucre including the deployment of the *I Brigada Infantería de Marina* - I Brigade of Marine Infantry to Sincelejo in the last week of March 1996.

The paramilitary group *Autodefensas de Sucre* - Sucre Self-Defence Groups, is reported to have been operating in the Montes de María region of the department of Sucre since 1994. In 1993 a paramilitary base was set up five kilometres from the community of Ceja de Mango, municipality of Sampués. At the beginning of 1996, 70 members of paramilitary groups operating in the department of Córdoba and the Urabá region of the department of Antioquia, were reportedly deployed to the department of Sucre and are reportedly patrolling the department. There have apparently been no attempts by members of the security forces to apprehend them or restrict their movements. These paramilitary forces are reportedly under the command of well-known paramilitary leader, Fidel Castaño, implicated in numerous cases of serious human rights violations including several massacres. Several warrants for the arrest of Fidel Castaño have been issued. He has been sentenced *in absentia* to a 20-year prison sentence for his part in the La Negra, Honduras and Punta Coquitos massacres in 1988 and yet to date no effort has been made by the authorities to arrest him.

The failure of the security forces to curtail paramilitary activities and halt paramilitary operations in Sucre in recent months is indicative of the support paramilitary groups have received from the security forces since the development of these groups in the region. Following an attempt to kill Guillermo Montero Carpio on 19 July 1990 in Sincelejo during a peasant farmer march, peasant farmers detained the gunmen who had tried to commit the murder and handed him over to the authorities. Several days later the gunman was seen entering and then freely leaving the Corozal base of the *Batallón Infantería de Marina No. 5* - Marine Infantry Battalion No.5.

The development of paramilitary groups in the region and the increased presence of the security forces has been in reaction to intense guerrilla activity in the department of Sucre in recent years. Paramilitary groups have been increasingly employed by large landowners in the department to confront guerrilla organizations and prevent them from kidnapping landowners in the region and extorting money from them. A reported decline in extortion in the region has been attributed to such paramilitary activity. However, paramilitary action has also reportedly been used by cattle-ranchers to expand their landholdings in the region. Many peasant farmer families have been forced to abandon their lands which have subsequently been appropriated by powerful landowning interests. With the increase of paramilitary action in the department of Sucre, Fidel Castaño is reported to be acquiring land in the region.

The development of paramilitary groups operating in the region appears to be an integral part of the counter-insurgency strategy employed by the security forces. This involves the deliberate targeting of those in the civilian population suspected of sympathizing with guerrilla forces. In practice, this often means that those members of the civilian population who are active in legal opposition parties or organizations seeking socio-economic alternatives which challenge powerful local political elites and/or powerful local economic interests, are often considered subversives. Similarly, peasant farmers living in conflict areas and teachers amongst others are often labelled guerrilla sympathizers. In a recent article in the *El Tiempo* newspaper, (17 March 1996), a member of a paramilitary group outlined the paramilitary strategy in Sucre stating that paramilitary groups were prepared to make "*guerra por la paz hasta las últimas consecuencias*" - "war for peace to the ultimate consequences", not only "*eliminando subversivos sino quitándoles posibles adherentes*" - "eliminating not only subversives but also removing possible adherents".

It is believed that sectors of the Colombian security forces share this attitude of considering grassroots organizations and often whole communities as subversives. They routinely permit paramilitary groups to patrol and intimidate the civilian population whilst they withdraw or 'turn a blind-eye'. In several towns in the department of Sucre, members of the security forces have withdrawn and allowed paramilitary groups to enter communities and commit serious human rights violations.

On 13 March, following an overnight attack on the Chalán police station by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) - Colombia Revolutionary Armed Forces, in which eleven police agents were killed, the Sub-Director of the National Police, General Luis Enrique Montenegro, accused the inhabitants of Chalán, a town of a population of some 4,000 people, being guerrilla "*cómplices*" - "accomplices". In a press conference given in Santafé de Bogotá, the general, referring to the population of Chalán, reportedly stated: "*Ellos sabían del asalto guerrillero y no fueron capaces de informar ... O están con ellos o están con nosotros*" - "They knew about the guerrilla attack and did not bother to inform the authorities ... either they are with them or with us". The Director of the National Police, General Rosso José Serrano, reacting to the guerrilla attack on the Chalán Police Station for his part stated "*si la población no nos colabora, pues sacamos a la Policía y que entre la guerrilla y acabe con todos*" - "if the population does not collaborate with us, we'll withdraw the police and let the guerrilla finish off the lot of them". Several days after these statements were made, police agents stationed within the urban area were withdrawn from the town and paramilitaries entered the town. An estimated 2,100 people have been displaced from the municipality of Chalán in recent months as a result.

In the days following the attack on the Chalán police station, police posts were also withdrawn from several other municipalities in the department of Sucre including Caimito, Los Palmitos, Betulia, Morroa, Colosó, Buenavista, Sucre and La Unión. There is serious concern that paramilitary groups will move into these municipalities. Such concern has led to an exodus of peasant farmer families. Other communities such as Chinulito, municipality of Colosó, have reportedly been practically abandoned by its inhabitants, whilst approximately only forty families remain in the community of La Ceiba, municipality of Chalán.

The paramilitary offensive in Sucre together with continued guerrilla actions in the region has led to the displacement of many peasant families throughout the department. Since the beginning of the

year, approximately 900 peasant families have fled to the departmental capital, Sincelejo. There are increasing fears for the safety of people who have fled to Sincelejo since heavily armed men believed to be members of paramilitary forces have been witnessed patrolling in the areas in which displaced families are living.

Popular Activists and other Members of the Civilian Population under Threat

The killings in recent months of popular activists, peasant farmers, teachers, legal opposition party activists and demobilized guerrillas, in the context of the large-scale paramilitary offensive in the region, has heightened concerns for the safety of members of these sectors in recent weeks. In particular there is serious concern for the following people. These people have either received written death threats, telephoned death threats, have been subject to constant surveillance or have been sought by unknown individuals who ask for them in the places they are known to frequent:

Jesús Barrios Acosta, a teacher and president of the *Asociación de Educadores Sucre* (ADES) - Sucre Teacher's Association.

Edinson Zamora, founder of the *Movimiento Cívico de Ovejas* - Ovejas Civic Movement, ex-mayor of Ovejas, and a candidate for the *Asamblea Departamental de Sucre* - Sucre Departmental Assembly.

Alberto Sánchez, teacher, member of ADES and demobilized guerrilla of the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) - Popular Liberation Army.

Néstor Herrera Pacheco, a deputy in the Sucre Departmental Assembly for the *Nueva Colombia*-New Colombia Party and the founder of the *Fundación para la Investigación y el Desarrollo en Sucre* (FIDES) - Research and Development Foundation of Sucre.

Jaime Vides Ferias, a journalist who is a correspondent for the El Universal newspaper and the regional television station, Telecaribe.

Ramiro Chamorro, a peasant farmer leader belonging to the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos - Línea Sincelejo* - National Association of Peasant Farm Workers - Sincelejo Branch.

Antonio Gómez Meza, a teacher, a member of ADES and a *Unión Patriótica* - Patriotic Union party activist.

Guillermo Montero Carpio, president of the *Asociación Nacional Usuarios Campesinos - Sucre* (ANUC) - Sucre Branch of the National Association of Peasant Farm Workers and an administrator of ANUC at the national level.

Franklin Donado, founder of the *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* (CRS), Current of Socialist Renewal, a teacher, a member of ADES and a candidate to the National Congress.

Ana Silvia María Arrieta, a sociologist and former candidate to the Sucre Departmental Assembly for the *Asamblea por la Organización de Mujeres de Sucre* - Assembly for the Organization of Women of the department of Sucre.

Jorge Mercado, former worker in the departmental government and former director of the *Oficina de Reinserción de Sucre* - Sucre Office for Demobilization.

Miriam Pérez, founder and coordinator of the *Asociación de Amas de Casa Rurales de Sucre* (AMARS) - Sucre Association of Rural Housewives, administrator of the *Movimiento Ciudadano de Sucre* - Sucre Citizen's Movement and a member of the *Zonal de Derechos Humanos de Sucre* - Sucre Regional Human Rights Movement.

Tobías Galván Correa, a founder and director of the *Fundación para el Desarrollo Integral de la Comunidad* (FUNDEICO) - Foundation for the Integral Development of the Community, a member of the *Comité de Revocatoria del Mandato de San Pedro* - Committee for the Dismissal of the Mayor of San Pedro and a member of the *Zonal de Derechos Humanos de Sucre*.

Lácides Month Arrieta, a founder of FUNDEICO, member of the *Comité de Revocatoria del Mandato de San Pedro* and a member of the *Zonal de Derechos Humanos de Sucre*.

Edinson Manjarrés Prieto, a peasant farmer leader, founder of the *Cooperativa de Abastos de San Pedro* - San Pedro Supply Cooperative and of the *Comité de Revocatoria del Mandato de San Pedro*.

José Padilla, an administrator of the Sucre branch of the ANUC, a peasant farmer leader and a town councillor belonging to the *Movimiento Cívico de Morroa* - Morroa Civic Movement.

José Angel Bohórquez, a peasant farmer leader and member of the *Asociación de Cooperativas de la Costa*, (ASOCOSTA) - Association of Cooperatives of the Coast.

Olga Díaz, former candidate to the Chalán town council, a founder of the *Asociación de Mujeres Chalaneras* (ASOMUCHAS) - Association of Women of Chalán.

Larchín Steer Luna, lawyer and a member of the *Comité de Revocatoria del Mandato de San Pedro*, and an adviser for the *Comité de la Tercera Edad de San Pedro* - San Pedro Old Age Pensioner's Association.

Carlos Barrios, member of the *Sindicato de Empleados Públicos* - Union of Public Employees, and a spokesman of the *Comité de Revocatoria del Mandato de San Benito Abad* - Committee for the Dismissal of the Mayor of San Benito Abad.

On 10 April, the Governor of Sucre, Héctor Pérez Santos, announced his intention to convoke *una cumbre de seguridad* - a security summit, on 24 April 1996 in Sincelejo to which the Minister of the Interior, Horacio Serpa Uribe, the Minister of Defence, Juan Carlos Esguerra Portocarrero; the Minister of Education, María Emma Mejía; the Director of Planning, Antonio Ocampo Gaviria; and the *Consejero Presidencial para la Costa Atlántica* - Presidential Adviser on the Atlantic Coast,

Eduardo Verano de la Rosa, amongst other officials were invited to attend. The announcement followed a visit to the Governor by legal left-wing political party activists and demobilized guerrillas who asked for a meeting with military commanders, the National Police and the *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*, (DAS) - Administrative Security Department, to ask for measures to be taken to guarantee their safety. In the event a *Consejo de Seguridad* - Security Council was held on 2 May at the *Batallón de Infantería No.5* base in Corozal which was attended by the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Defence amongst other state authorities. This Security Council reportedly led to a commitment to redeploy fifty police agents to the municipalities of Chalán and Colosó in the following months and a further fifty police agents by the end of the year. To date there has been no confirmation that security forces have been redeployed to these two municipalities. It was also reported that helicopters would be purchased for the armed forces to reinforce their capacity to respond to conflict situations. The Security Council also gave its support to the idea of creating a *Comisión Regional de Convivencia* - Regional Commission for Peaceful Co-existence.

According to information Amnesty International has received to date none of those responsible for the human rights violations detailed in this document has been identified or arrested by the Colombian authorities.

Guerrilla Abuses of International Humanitarian Law

Several guerrilla organizations operate in the department of Sucre. These include the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), - Army of National Liberation, the EPL and the *Frentes 35 y 37 de las FARC* - 35 and 36 Fronts of the FARC. Guerrilla forces in Colombia have been responsible for numerous violations of international humanitarian law, including the taking of hostages and the deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians. Guerrilla forces have also been responsible for the killing of members of the armed forces who have surrendered. Armed opposition groups frequently take hostages in exchange for money. In Sucre 37 cattle-ranchers were reportedly kidnapped and held hostage in 1995. In the first four months of 1996, 24 kidnappings have been reported though it is not known whether these are all cases of kidnapping and hostage-taking by guerrilla forces. Ransom money has become one of the principal sources of income for some guerrilla groups. Other victims are held hostage for political motives, either to pressure the authorities to accede to guerrilla proposals or to demand publicity for their policies. A number of local officials, particularly mayors who are accused of corruption or unjust social policies, have been kidnapped and subjected to "popular trials", to force them to resign or to "return" allegedly misused public funds. Some have been summarily executed by the guerrillas. On 4 November 1995, Xilena Patricia Vásquez Gómez, a 17-year-old pupil at the *Colegio Nacionalizado Víctor Zúbiria* - Víctor Zúbiria Nationalized School, in the municipality of Colosó, is believed to have been killed by guerrilla forces for having "*relaciones afectivas con un agente de la policía*" - "amorous relations with a police agent".

Amnesty International condemns these types of violations of international humanitarian law committed by armed opposition groups.