

PUBLIC

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EXTRA 63/99

Fear for safety / Abduction

24 May 1999

COLOMBIA

Piedad Córdoba de Castro [f], human rights defender and
Liberal Party Senator

On 21 May 1999 Piedad Córdoba de Castro, Liberal Party Senator and president of the Senate's Human Rights Commission, was abducted in Medellín by a group of 15 armed men. Amnesty International is gravely concerned for her safety.

On 22 May, Carlos Castaño, leader of the right-wing national paramilitary alliance, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), United Self-Defence Forces, issued public statements claiming responsibility for the abduction. In the statement Castaño demanded that the AUC be granted political recognition and a direct role in forthcoming peace talks between the Colombian government and left-wing guerrilla groups. The government has until now refused paramilitary groups such a role.

Piedad Córdoba de Castro, a mother of four children, is renowned for her work on human rights and peace. She repeatedly highlighted the duty of the state to combat paramilitary groups. A day before her abduction she took part in a Forum for Peace in the war-torn Magdalena Medio region, where she called for civilians to be respected and not drawn into the conflict. In recent months she had been a high profile supporter of legislative proposals to criminalize "disappearances" and reform the Military Penal Code. These are measures crucial to ending the impunity at present enjoyed by those responsible for human rights violations.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

For several years, paramilitary groups operating in alliance with the armed forces have been responsible for many serious human rights violations. Human rights organizations and workers are frequently labelled guerrilla collaborators or supporters by the security forces and their paramilitary allies. These organizations and individuals are thus presented as legitimate targets in the counter-insurgency war and are then frequently subject to human rights violations. More than 20 human rights defenders have been killed or "disappeared" in Colombia in the last two years.

In January 1999 four human rights workers with the *Instituto de Capacitación Popular* (IPC), Popular Training Institute, were abducted by the AUC. Carlos Castaño issued a public statement claiming the four were being held as "prisoners of war" and that their abduction signalled that paramilitary groups considered human rights defenders legitimate targets in the counter-insurgency war. The unanimous national and international outrage at the abductions was of primary importance in securing the release of the four (see Extra 12/99, AMR 23/04/99, 29 January 1999).

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

- condemning the abduction of Piedad Córdoba de Castro on 21 May 1999 by the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*;
- expressing concern for her safety;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to establish her whereabouts, guarantee her safety and secure her immediate release;
- calling on the authorities to investigate promptly, fully and impartially her abduction, to make the results of the investigation public and to bring those responsible to justice;
- urging the authorities to fulfil their commitment to protect all those working for the promotion and protection of human rights;
- urging the authorities to adhere to their commitments to dismantle paramilitary groups and to effectively prosecute all members of the security forces with links to such organizations.

APPEALS TO (please note that fax tones are sometimes difficult to get as the machines are sometimes turned off for periods. If this is the case, please try later).

President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: President Pastrana, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 44281 PALP CO
Faxes: + 57 1 286 7434 / 284 2186 / 337 1351
Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President Pastrana

Attorney General

Dr. Alfonso Gómez Méndez,
 Fiscal General de la Nación, Fiscalía General de la Nación,
 Diagonal 22B 5201, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Fiscal General, Fiscalía General, Bogotá, Colombia
Faxes: + 57 1 570 2022 (a recorded message will play before putting you through to a ringing tone for the fax machine)
Salutation: Estimado Dr./ Dear Dr. Gómez

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Néstor Humberto Martínez,
 Ministro del Interior, Ministerio del Interior,
 Carrera 8, No.8-09, Paso 2, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Ministerio Interior, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO
Faxes: + 57 1 286 8025
Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister

Minister of Defence

Dr. Rodrigo Lloreda
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Ministro Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO
Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874
Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Colombian Senate Human Rights Commission
 Comisión de Derechos Humanos, Senado de la República
 Carrera 7a, No. 8-68, Of 212B
 Santafé de Bogotá
 COLOMBIA

Faxes: + 57 1 336 6565

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 21 June 1999.