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Fear for Safety

30 July 1999

COLOMBIA

Residents of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of residents of the "Peace Community" of San José de Apartadó, Antioquia department, following reports that paramilitaries are planning an attack there.

On 24 July 1999 paramilitary forces reportedly held a meeting in the village of Carepa, not far from San José de Apartadó, where they apparently rounded up local inhabitants and told them that they were planning an attack in the area in the near future. It is believed that the residents of San José de Apartadó, whom the paramilitaries accuse of being guerilla sympathisers, will be the target of this attack.

Two civilians with links to the Peace Community have been killed this month, reportedly by paramilitaries. Gilberto Arango was killed on 10 July in Las Nieves and Emilio Zapata was killed on 23 July in Apartadó.

On 14 July, a paramilitary force attacked the nearby village of Saiza, Córdoba, killing at least eight people. Earlier this year (see UA 64/99, AMR 23/29/99, 6 April 1999) paramilitaries attacked San José de Apartadó, killing three people. During the attack they called the peace community a "*comunidad de guerrilleros*" (guerilla community). Since then residents have continued to report sightings of paramilitaries in the vicinity, sometimes in the company of the Colombian army which has taken no effective action to combat paramilitary activity in the area.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The community of San José de Apartadó is made up of around 1,000 people, forcibly displaced from their homes in the Urabá region in north-western Colombia in 1996 and 1997 by massacres committed by army-backed paramilitary groups and guerrilla organizations. In March 1997 they declared themselves a *Comunidad de Paz*, Peace Community, in an attempt to persuade warring factions to respect their neutrality and right to life. Since then, some 60 residents have "disappeared" or been killed, the majority by army-backed paramilitary groups, others by members of the Colombian army or the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the principal guerrilla organization. None of the actors in the war-torn region of Urabá accepts their right to neutrality.

Inhabitants have repeatedly demanded that the government secure conditions for their safe return to the lands they have abandoned, and guarantee their safety in the community of San José, yet the authorities have persistently failed to act to end the campaign of attacks against them. The government has also failed to act when senior regional armed forces commanders and political leaders have publicly accused the community of being guerrilla sympathizers because they refuse to allow any armed group, including the Colombian army, to maintain a presence there.

Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. Over the past five years several thousand civilians have been killed by paramilitary groups throughout the country. 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.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of the population of San José de Apartadó, Antioquia department;

- urging the authorities to implement all necessary measures deemed appropriate by residents to guarantee the safety of the population of San José de Apartadó;
- calling for a full, prompt and impartial investigation into reports of an impending paramilitary attack on the community;
- calling for full, prompt and impartial investigations into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the area, and urging that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups be brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate and decisive action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with repeated government commitments.

APPEALS TO: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 / 337 1351

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President Pastrana

Regional Military Commander:

General Martín Orlando Carreño Sandoval,
Comandante XVII Brigada del Ejército, Carepá, Urabá, Antioquia, Colombia

Tel/Faxes: + 57 4 823 6844 / 823 6601 (If call is answered, say "Fax, por favor")

Salutation: Sr. Comandante / Dear Commander Carreño

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

Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO

Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874

Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister

Governor of the Department of Antioquia

Dr. Alberto Builes Ortega, Gobernador del Departamento de Antioquia
Gobernación de Antioquia, Calle 42B, # 52-106, Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia

Telegrams: Gobernador de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia

Faxes: + 574 381 1342

Salutation: Sr. Gobernador / Dear Governor

COPIES TO:Intercongregational Commission for Justice and Peace

Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz, AA 31861, Santafé de Bogotá

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 10 September 1999.