

COLOMBIA Members of the human rights organization *Corporación SEMBRAR*

Members of the Bogotá-based human rights organization *Corporación Sembrar* have been kept under surveillance and threatened. The threats appear to be related to the organization's activities in and around the city of Barrancabermeja, department of Santander, an area for which army-backed paramilitaries are waging a military campaign for control. In this context, Amnesty International is seriously concerned for their safety.

On 16 July, an anonymous male caller told Sembrar "look, we've got our eye on you because of the Barranca [Barrancabermeja] stuff. Report that." ("oiga, mire ustedes están en la mira por lo de Barranca [Barrancabermeja]. Comunique eso"). Members of Sembrar, as well as other people who work with the organization, have been watched on entering and leaving its office in Bogotá.

On 5 July, Sembrar and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provided legal assistance during the detention, in Barrancabermeja, of several displaced people who were subsequently released. The armed forces and their paramilitary allies often consider those from displaced communities to be guerrilla sympathizers or collaborators. As a result, they often suffer serious human rights violations including killing and "disappearance".

Sembrar, along with over a hundred other NGOs, is supporting a high profile international solidarity event, the *Caravana Internacional por la Vida* ("International Caravan for Life"), that left the capital Bogotá today for Barrancabermeja and the nearby Sur de Bolívar region. Sixty-five international delegates participating in the *Caravana* will provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population which is suffering serious hardship because of the armed conflict in the region. Amnesty International believes that this international attention focussed on Barrancabermeja and the surrounding area is providing vital support to human rights organisations and is helping them to continue their legitimate work, despite the threats against them.

Sembrar has specialized in defending the legal rights of victims of human rights violations in various regions of Colombia since it was founded more than ten years ago. Since 1998 it has worked with social and human rights organisations in the city of Barrancabermeja, documenting human rights violations in the region, and supporting national and international solidarity initiatives with local communities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Army-backed paramilitaries are now waging a military campaign for control of Barrancabermeja and the surrounding region. In the last four years they have taken control of almost all this region, massacring civilians and killing community activists. As the principal city and river port of the region, Barrancabermeja is their last key target. The few human rights organizations still working in the city are now the only force standing up to enormous pressure from paramilitary groups to collaborate with them. The paramilitaries are therefore intent on driving all human rights activists out of the town. Those who do not leave, or agree to collaborate, are at very grave risk. Human rights groups have consistently said that only international support will enable them to continue their work.

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.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish or your own language:

- urging the Colombian authorities to take appropriate measures to guarantee the safety of members of the *Corporación Sembrar* so they can continue their legitimate work for the defence and promotion of human rights;
- calling for an immediate, impartial and full investigation into the telephone threat on 16 July and the surveillance of people entering and leaving the offices of *Sembrar*, asking for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- urging the Colombian government to adhere to its obligations regarding human rights defenders as laid out in United Nations (UN) and Organisation of American States (OAS) declarations, and in line with repeated recommendations made by the UN to the Colombian government to take measures to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders;
- expressing concern that the government has taken no effective action against paramilitary groups 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 department of Santander, urging that the results are made public, and that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice.

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 1 566 2071 / 336 2109 / 337 1351

Telegram:Presidente de la República, Bogotá, Colombia

Salutation:Dear President / Excmo. Sr. Presidente

Minister of Defence

Dr. Gustavo Bell Lemus
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegram: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

Fax: +57 1 222 0059

Salutation:Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro

Governor of Santander Department

Gobernador del Departamento de Santander
 Sr. Jorge Eliecer Gómez Villamizar
 Gobernación de Santander, Calle 37, No. 10-30
 Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia

Faxes: + 57 76 339889

Telegrams:Gobernador del Departamento, Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia

Salutation:Dear Governor / Sr. Gobernador

COPIES TO:

National non-governmental human rights organization

SEMBRAR

Apartado Aéreo 34692

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 13 September 2001.