

UA 309/99

Fear for**COLOMBIA**Civilian population of the village of Las Mercedes**Iñigo Eguiluz, Spanish aid worker] killed
Jorge Luis Mazo, priest]**

On 28 November 1999, over 500 people from the village of Las Mercedes, on the Atrato River in Chocó department, were forced to flee their homes after threats from a paramilitary group to leave or be killed. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of those who may still be in the community and for those who have fled - most making their way to the nearby department capital of Quibdó.

On 18 November 1999, a highspeed paramilitary launch rammed and sank a boat on the Atrato river near Las Mercedes in which a humanitarian commission were travelling. Iñigo Eguiluz, a Spanish aid worker with the non-governmental organization *Paz y Tercer Mundo*, Peace and Third World, and Jorge Luis Mazo, a Colombian catholic priest attached to the local diocese, were both killed. The commission was returning from a visit to local communities to verify reports of attacks on the civilian population by the different armed actors in Colombia's armed conflict.

On 24 November, after intense international and national pressure, nine paramilitary members were arrested in connection with the killings and detained near Las Mercedes. The community is under threat as a reprisal for the arrests.

According to reports, the launch used in the attack was stolen by paramilitary forces over two years ago but has been used openly since then to control river traffic and set up illegal checkpoints. Despite being repeatedly informed of this, neither the police nor armed forces have taken action to seize the vessel or arrest the paramilitaries.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Atrato is a strategically important river running through northeastern Colombia. Army-backed paramilitary forces control the river while guerrilla groups maintain a strong presence in the tributaries. The civilian population living on the river suffer constant threats and attacks from the warring factions seeking to consolidate their presence. In recent years over 6000 forcibly displaced have sought safety in Quibdó.

Peasant communities in disputed zones in Colombia's long-running civil conflict frequently suffer human rights violations. Neither the armed forces and their paramilitary allies nor the left-wing armed opposition groups recognize the civilian population's neutrality in the conflict. In the past ten years over one and half million people from rural communities have been internally displaced.

Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. Over the past five years several thousand civilians have been killed by paramilitary groups. 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 members of the community of Las Mercedes in Chocó department;
- calling on the authorities to take all measures deemed appropriate by those at risk to guarantee their safety;
- urging a prompt, full and impartial investigation into the death threats made against the community by a paramilitary group and for all those responsible to be brought to justice;
- condemning the recent killing on 18 November 1999 of Iñigo Eguiluz of *Paz y Tercer Mundo* and Jorge Luis Mazo, a priest in the diocese of Quibdó, by paramilitary forces; and calling for a full investigation into their deaths, for the results to be made public and for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- calling for investigations into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating on the Atrato River, and for all paramilitary groups to be effectively combatted and dismantled.

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 / 284 2186 / 337 1351
Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President Pastrana

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

Commander of the Riverine Battalion No 50 of the Colombian Navy

Colonel Nicolás Montenegro Montenegro,
Batallón Fluvial No.50 de la Armada
Avenida de La Playa, Turbo, Antioquia, Colombia.
Telegrams: Coronel Montenegro
Faxes: + 57 4 827 2476
Salutation: Estimado Sr. Comandante / Dear Commander

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Néstor Humberto Martínez, Ministro del Interior
Ministerio del Interior, Carrera 8, No.8-09, Piso 2
Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA
Telegrams: Ministerio del Interior, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO
Fax: + 57 1 286 8025 / 281 5884 / 342 3201
Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

COPIES TO: Diocese of Quibdó

Diócesis de Quibdó, Comisión Diocesana Vida, Justicia y Paz,
Apartado Aéreo 300, Quibdó, Chocó, 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 11 January 1999.