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Fear for Safety

8 December 1994

COLOMBIA Tirso VELEZ, Mayor of Tibú, department of Norte de Santander

Amnesty International fears that further attempts may be made on the life of Tirso Vélez, Mayor of Tibú, before he leaves office on 31 December 1994. There have been several foiled attacks against him, most recently on 13 September, and a "death squad" has reportedly been set up to kill him.

Members of the Colombian armed forces attached to the *Grupo Mecanizado Maza No.5*, Fifth Mechanized Unit (part of the *Batallón Santander*, Santander Battalion) were reportedly planning to kill Tirso Vélez on 13 September as he travelled on the Cúcuta to Tibú road. However, the operation was reportedly suspended when two of the ten men involved refused to participate after being told the identity of their victim. Tirso Vélez himself is said to have been informed of the plan by an army deserter. Since then, the mayor has suffered continuous harassment and has had to take a series of precautions to protect himself.

The mayor's bodyguards may also be in danger, given that the orders for the planned attack were reportedly to carry out a multiple killing if necessary.

Furthermore, there are fears for the safety of whoever informed the mayor of the plan. This concern is heightened by the fact that the department of Norte de Santander has seen increasing human rights violations and paramilitary activity in recent months since the region was militarized with the sending in of specialist counterinsurgency units.

This is not the first time the mayor's life has been in danger. In 1993, following the publication of a poem written by him (*Tibú un Sueño de Paz - Tibú a Dream of Peace*), the mayor was accused of subversion by military authorities. Around the same time there were two foiled attempts on his life. One of these involved two armed individuals in plain clothes, one a former guerrilla and the other a member of the army, who were arrested in the vicinity of the Town Hall. The other attempt involved a member of the armed forces who, upon his arrest by the *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS)*, Civil Security Department, told those detaining him that he had orders to kill the mayor in Cúcuta. According to an anonymous source, the man was released when it was established that he was a member of the armed forces. In September 1993 Tirso Vélez was arrested and charged with "subversion" under Colombia's anti-terrorist legislation. He was released after a public order judge ruled that false witnesses had been used to formulate the charges against him.

Tirso Vélez is mayor for the *Unión Patriótica (UP)*, Patriotic Union, an opposition political party whose members have been particularly targeted for human rights violations.

The mayor has denounced the threats to his life to the *Defensor del Pueblo*, People's Defender, and the *Consejero Presidencial para los Derechos Humanos*, Presidential Advisor for Human Rights.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In recent years the Colombian security forces and their paramilitary allies have been responsible for widespread and systematic human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, torture and arbitrary arrest. Amongst those

who have been particularly targets have been members of opposition parties often labelled as subversives. Mayors working in municipalities where guerrilla forces have influence are especially vulnerable to such accusations. In the past such accusations have often been followed by human rights violations. Since he came to office in August 1994, President Ernesto Samper Pizano has made repeated promises to improve the human rights situation but as yet threats and killings of members of opposition political groups, civic and popular activists amongst others have continued.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Tirso Vélez, Mayor of Tibú, his bodyguards and whoever informed the mayor of the plan to kill him on 13 September 1994, and urging the authorities to take all possible measures to guarantee their safety;
- calling for full and impartial investigations into the alleged "death squad" set up to kill Tirso Vélez, the foiled operation to kill him on the 13 September 1994 and the reported cases of threats and harassment against the mayor and ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

**APPEALS TO**

President of Colombia:

Señor Ernesto Samper Pizano  
 Presidente de la República  
 Palacio de Nariño  
 Santa Fé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegrams: President Samper, Bogotá, Colombia**

**Telexes: 44281 PALP CO**

**Faxes: + 57 1 286 7434/287 7939**

**Salutation:Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Samper**

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Horacio Serpa Uribe  
 Ministro de Gobierno  
 Ministerio de Gobierno  
 Carrera 8a, No.8-09, Piso 7<sup>o</sup>  
 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

**Telegrams: Ministro de Gobierno, Bogota, Colombia**

**Telexes:45406 MINGO CO**

**Faxes:57 1 281 5884**

**Salutation:Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister**

Minister of Defence

Dr. Fernando Botero Zea  
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional  
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional  
 Avenida El Dorado - Carrera 52  
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegrams:Ministro de Defensa Botero Zea, Bogota, Colombia**

**Telexes:42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO**

**Faxes:+ 57 1 222 1874**

**Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister**

**COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:**

Advocate for the People:

Dr. Jaime Córdoba Triviño  
Defensor del Pueblo  
Defensoría del Pueblo  
Calle 35, No.7-25, P.5  
Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

MINGA

Calle 19 No. 4-88  
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 1 January 1995.