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Colombia: One year on -- where are Ángel and Claudia?

One year on from the "disappearance" of human rights activists Ángel Quintero and Claudia Patricia Monsalve, their families, friends and colleagues are still in the dark as to what happened to them, Amnesty International said today, renewing its call on the Colombian authorities to intensify efforts to establish their fate and whereabouts.

Over a year after the approval of the Disappearance Law, this case remains unresolved. "What does this say about the Colombian authorities' commitment to human rights?" the organization added.

The ongoing investigation into Ángel and Claudia's "disappearance" has revealed that thousands of telephone lines -- including those of the organization that they worked for, the Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (ASFADDES -- Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared) and other non-governmental organizations -- had been illegally tapped by security forces over a period of many months.

"The fact that judicial investigations have uncovered illegal tapping of ASFADDES phones by security forces before the 'disappearances' makes it imperative that a full and thorough investigation is carried out to determine the extent of security force responsibility," Amnesty International said.

"Telephone tapping is just one of the many forms of harassment human rights defenders in Colombia suffer at the hands of the security forces -- but by no means the most worrying. Threats, persecution and violence are an everyday reality for human rights activists nationwide,

whose pleas for protection regularly go unheeded," the organization added, recalling the recent killing of human rights defender Yolanda Cerón.

"The Colombian authorities must send a clear message that the victimization of human rights defenders will not be tolerated, and take all necessary steps to ensure that those responsible are not free to act with impunity," Amnesty International said, regretting that President Pastrana has consistently ignored recommendations put forward by both the international community and by human rights workers in Colombia for the protection of human rights defenders.

"If the Colombian Government had listened and implemented these recommendations, the disappearance of Ángel and Claudia could and would have been prevented," the organization said.

Amnesty International is calling for a full and impartial inquiry to be carried out into the "disappearance" of Ángel Quintero and Claudia Patricia Monsalve, and for all those involved in its ordering, planning and carrying out to be brought to justice. The organization is also calling for the urgent revision of intelligence files holding information which could be used to persecute human rights defenders -- a revision which human rights defenders have been demanding for over four years.

"The revelation of illegal phone tapping of the ASFADDES offices by the security forces makes this review all the more urgent," Amnesty International said.

Background

Ángel Quintero and Claudia Patricia Monsalve "disappeared" in Medellín, Colombia, on 6 October 2000. They were reportedly abducted barely a

month after Amnesty International denounced death threats against them. Their whereabouts are still unknown.

When Ángel Quintero and Claudia Monsalve finished work at the ASFADDES branch in Medellín that day, they went out to a restaurant with five others from the office. They went on to a bar, and when Claudia left, Ángel said he would walk to the bus stop with her. He never came back. Witnesses say they were abducted by two gunmen on a motorcycle and a group of men in a pick-up truck.

Amnesty International has repeatedly recommended to the Colombian government the adoption of a comprehensive protection program to safeguard those working for human rights. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, also suggested an independent review of issues relating to the protection of human rights defenders, including the revision of security force intelligence files. The UN also urged that those responsible for human rights violations be brought to justice. The Colombian government has taken no action on any of these recommendations.

Ángel and Claudia were both active members of ASFADDES campaigning for justice in cases of the "disappearances" of members of their family. Claudia Monsalve's brother, Edgar Monsalve, was forcibly "disappeared" along with a friend on 6 May 1995. Judicial investigations into the paramilitary group members allegedly responsible for their "disappearance" implicated a police corporal, an army commander, and other police agents. In June 1996 charges against these members of the security forces were dropped after the military justice system took over jurisdiction of the case.

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