

UA 161/94 Possible extrajudicial executions / Fear for safety 22 April 1994

VENEZUELA Discovery of clandestine mass graves

During the second week of April 1994, local peasants discovered clandestine mass graves in a remote area in the Perijá hills, in the state of Zulia, bordering Colombia. The graves contain scores of human remains reportedly belonging to victims of extrajudicial executions, some reportedly buried recently. The discovery heightens Amnesty International's concerns that killings are being committed with impunity in this remote area, and it fears that further gross human rights violations may be committed against Indian peasants living there.

According to reports many of the remains, most of which belong to adult males, bear signs of close-range gunshot wounds to the head, resembling summary executions. Some remains appear to have been recently buried, while others have been buried for two or more years. The victims reportedly belong to local indigenous peasants, some of whom have been killed during the last years by hired gunmen, and members of the security forces, in the context of land-tenure conflicts.

The governor of Zulia has ordered the dismissal of the chief of rural police responsible for the Perijá region and an investigation into the killings. Amnesty International welcomes these measures, but remains concerned about the possibility of further killings and a continuation of the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. Clandestine graves have been discovered in the state of Zulia in the past, but those responsible have never been brought to justice, and in some cases those denouncing official involvement have been subjected to threats and intimidation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Over the years the local Indians, including Yucpas and Baris, have lost vast surfaces of their land to powerful landowners. Amnesty International has continued to receive reports of threats, harassment and attacks by members of the security forces, including the rural police, against members of indigenous communities in Perijá. For example, on 2 February 1994 three members of the Yucpa community of Kasmera in Perijá were killed and two seriously wounded by members of the Venezuelan army in circumstances suggesting extrajudicial executions (please see UA 45/94, AMR 53/02/94, 11 February 1994). According to reports those responsible have not been brought to justice.

The secret burial of victims of gross human rights violations has been reported in Zulia in the past. For example, in 1986 the remains of at least 16 people were discovered in a number of clandestine graves in the state of Zulia. At least four bodies were identified as those of people who had been arrested by members of the police, and had "disappeared" while under detention. Those responsible have reportedly benefitted from impunity, while many of the relatives of the victims, and a local journalist who had denounced the alleged police involvement in the killings, suffered threats and intimidation.

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

- expressing deep concern about the reported summary executions, whose victims have been discovered in clandestine mass graves in Perijá, state of Zulia;
- welcoming the investigations opened into the findings and calling for the

application of the **UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions**, which include the protection of relatives and witnesses;

- calling for all those responsible for the killings to be brought to justice, and for compensation to be provided to the relatives of the victims.

- calling for the adoption of immediate and effective measures to prevent further gross human rights violations - including summary executions -, against members of indigenous communities in Zulia.

APPEALS TO

1) Minister of the Interior

Dr. Ramón Escovar Salom

Ministro de Relaciones Interiores

Ministerio de Relaciones Interiores

Carmelitas a Santa Capilla

Caracas, Venezuela

Telegrams: Ministro Interior, Caracas, Venezuela

Telexes: 26429 EXTER VC

Faxes: +58 2 815796

Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

1) Human Rights organization

Sres. COFAVIC

Faxes: +58 2 5725521

2) Human Rights organization

Sres PROVEA

Apartado 5156, Caracas 1010-A

Venezuela

Faxes: +58 2 816669

and to diplomatic representatives of accredited to your country

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 3 June 1994.