

# VENEZUELA

## @Family of peasant activist targeted by army unit

In May 1994, Amnesty International visited the western state of Zulia, Venezuela. The organization had been receiving reports of serious human rights violations in Zulia over a period of a number of years and visited the area in 1987 and 1993. This document describes the experiences of one family at the hands of members of the Venezuelan army.

Two members of the Landino family were tortured and imprisoned; others were beaten and threatened. Most serious of all, a 14-year-old girl was abducted and remains "disappeared". It is believed the family were targetted on account of Mario Landino's activities as a peasant leader. Other peasant leaders in the region have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment by members of the security forces. There has been no investigation into the incidents described in this document. No one has been held to account.

### ***"Disappearance" of Yolanda Landino***

**Yolanda Landino**, 14, "disappeared" on 27 March 1993, following a military raid on her house in the peasant community of "5 de Julio", municipality of Catatumbo, Zulia. She, her mother, **Eurides Contreras**, and eight of her brothers and sisters were at home waiting for news about their father **Mario Landino** and brother **Henry Landino**, who had "disappeared" the day before.

At 11:00am a group of around 60 members of the Venezuelan army - several of whom were hooded - raided the community. Some of them entered the Landino home without a search warrant. They accused the family of being guerrillas and interrogated Eurides Contreras and the older children about the activities of Mr. Landino and other family members, who they said had been collaborating with the Colombian guerrillas. The soldiers who asked the questions were allegedly hooded, and on several occasions they hit and slapped the children. Yolanda managed to leave the house, but was reportedly captured in the area later that day. She was never seen again, nor has she communicated with any of her family since her "disappearance".

The soldiers remained in the community for three days, during which time the Landinos remained under house detention. Two of the children were taken by a group of hooded soldiers to a site in the woods about 200 metres away from their home. There, the soldiers questioned the girls about their father's activities and hit them. They also threatened one of the girls with rape. Before leaving the community, a soldier told the Landinos that

Yolanda - who they accused of being a guerrilla - had been arrested, and that she would be killed.

The soldiers also raided three other homes in the community, and according to reports detained and tortured at least three men, including Nelson Fuentes, an elderly peasant, who was brutally tortured in front of other members of the community.

### ***Unlawful arrest and torture***

Yolanda's father, **Mario Landino**, 47, a Barí Indian and peasant activist, had been abducted together with her brother **Henry Landino**, 18, the previous day by a military patrol in the nearby town of El Cruce, where Mr. Landino was purchasing some goods for the cooperative he presided over.

Both men were blindfolded, handcuffed and transferred to an unknown destination, where they remained in secret detention, together with around 30 other men, reportedly arrested in the area, in or around the same date. They remained "disappeared" for eight days, after which their detention was acknowledged by the army, who accused them of collaborating with Colombian guerrillas.

Mr. Landino and his son suffered brutal torture including: semi-suffocation with plastic bags containing ammonia; semi-asphyxiation with a rope round the neck; beatings and blows to various parts of the body but particularly the head and chest; burns; painful burns in the eyes caused by a caustic substance, and death threats. Both men, and other detainees, were injected at least twice with an unknown substance which *"produced a burning sensation inside the body"*. (*"producía un ardor en el cuerpo"*) The blindfold produced a serious infection in Mr. Landino's eyes, as a result of which he has almost lost his eyesight. During the torture session Mr. Landino and his son were forced to sign papers they could not read and to confess to charges of collaborating with guerrillas.

On the second day Mario Landino was informed by the soldiers that his daughter Yolanda had been arrested and that she would be killed if he did not confess. A day later Mr. Landino heard soldiers joking about his daughter's murder, and was later informed as he was being tortured, that she had been killed.

Mr. Landino and his son were transferred to a police station in Santa Bárbara on 4 April 1993, where their detention was officially acknowledged for the first time. Prior to their transfer, they were threatened that if they complained about the torture they had suffered while under military detention, they would suffer electric shock treatment at the hands of the police, . They remained in the police station for three days, without food or water, before their transferral to the state prison of Sabaneta, in Maracaibo, on charges of collaborating with guerrilla activities. Before their transfer to prison, a forensic doctor with

the criminal investigations police (PTJ, *policía técnica judicial*) reportedly examined the two men but failed to record the injuries they had sustained. Once in prison, a forensic doctor confirmed Mario Landino's injuries, including fractured ribs, burns, and injuries to the eyes.

Mr. Landino remained in prison until March 1994, when he was provisionally released for lack of evidence. His son Henry Landino remains in prison awaiting trial, despite the lack of evidence of the charges brought against him.

Despite repeated complaints about Yolanda Landino's

Mario Landino with his son Henry

"disappearance", the arbitrary imprisonment and torture of Mario Landino and his son Henry, and the harassment and ill-treatment suffered by the rest of the Landino family, Yolanda remains "disappeared" and no one has been brought to justice for the brutal human rights violations

suffered by the Landino family at the hands of the Venezuelan army, neither has the government provided any compensation. Henry Landino remains imprisoned on charges of collaborating with Colombian guerrillas based on his confessions extracted under torture.

### ***The State of Zulia***

This state surrounds the oil-rich gulf of Maracaibo, and lies on the border with Colombia. There is a high incidence of human rights violations by the security forces, both in rural and urban areas. Peasants and members of the three main Indian groups (Wayúus, Barís and Yukpas) are the most frequent targets of human rights violations. According to reports most of the perpetrators belong to the Venezuelan army stationed along the border.

The army's presence in the region has increased over the past few years, supposedly to reduce drug trafficking, and to combat the presence of Colombian guerrilla groups on the

Venezuelan side of the border. As a result of the pattern of widespread and indiscriminate human rights violations in rural areas, a large number of peasants and many Indians have abandoned the region. Mining companies, particularly coal-mining and oil prospectors, have progressively moved into the area, which is said to be very rich in oil and minerals.

Longstanding disputes over land possession between landowners and local populations have also given rise to human rights violations. Local peasants report constant intimidation and attacks, both by members of the security forces and by heavily-armed private guards linked to the powerful landowners (*ganaderos*).

The new state governor, Lolita Aniyar de Castro has taken a number of steps to address the situation in Zulia. She has, for example, suspended the use of the Law of Vagrants and Crooks (*Ley de Vagos y Maleantes*) and has forbidden the use of firearms by police during demonstrations. However, in rural areas, particularly those near the border of Colombia which are virtually controlled by the army and powerful landowners, those responsible for the growing reports of human rights violations are benefitting from almost total impunity.

Amnesty International believes that in the case of the Landino family, the government must take immediate steps to:

- ◆ carry out a full and impartial investigation to clarify the whereabouts of Yolanda Landino and to bring those responsible for her "disappearance" to justice;
- ◆ investigate allegations of torture of other members of the Landino family and prosecute those responsible;
- ◆ order the immediate and unconditional release of Henry Landino;
- ◆ provide compensation to the family for the human rights violations they have suffered and guarantee their physical safety;

More generally, Amnesty International submits the following recommendations:

- ◆ a clear, unequivocal message must be sent to members of the security forces based in Zulia that human rights violations will not be tolerated;
- ◆ members of the security forces implicated in torture, extrajudicial executions or "disappearances" should be immediately suspended from any position of authority and should be brought to justice;
- ◆ investigations should establish chain-of-command responsibility for human rights violations and should investigate patterns of human rights violations as well as individual cases. Anyone found to have ordered, committed or covered up human rights violations should be brought to justice;
- ◆ the government should immediately disband any paramilitary unit, presently operating in Zulia with the complicity of the armed forces and bring to justice those involved in human rights violations.