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Colombia: Killings of human rights defenders continue under new government

The new government of President Juan Manuel Santos, who assumed office in August, must urgently and effectively protect those human rights defenders campaigning for the return of stolen lands, Amnesty International said following the killing of Hernando Pérez in Necoclí Municipality in the north-western department of Antioquia on 19 September.

Hernando Pérez was a leader of the Association of Victims for the Restitution of Land and Property (*Asociación de Víctimas para la Restitución de Tierras y Bienes*, Asovirestibi). He had represented a number of communities which had been forcibly and often violently displaced by paramilitary groups, either acting alone or in collusion with the security forces.

Hours before his death, Hernando Pérez had participated in an official ceremony in Nueva Colonia, a rural settlement in the municipality of Turbo, in the department of Antioquia, which was attended by the Agriculture Minister, to return land to dozens of peasant farmer families who had been forcibly displaced by the “Bloque Bananero” paramilitary group.

Hernando Pérez’s killing is only the latest of a series of deadly attacks across the country against those who have dared to campaign for the return of the millions of hectares of land which have been stolen, mainly by paramilitary groups but also by guerrilla forces, in the course of the armed conflict.

Most recently, Alexander Quintero was killed on 23 May in Santander de Quilichao in the south-western region of Cauca, while Rogelio Martínez was gunned down by armed assailants on 18 May in San Onofre, in the north-western department of Sucre. These communities face on-going threats by paramilitary groups, which continue to operate in these two regions.

Colombia’s paramilitary groups, which have sown terror across Colombia for decades, were supposedly demobilized in a process initiated in 2003 by the previous administration of President Álvaro Uribe, but many such groups continue to operate in many parts of the country.

Between 3 and 5 million people, mostly Indigenous Peoples, as well as Afro-descendant and peasant farmer communities living in rural areas, have been forced to leave their homes and lands, often violently, during Colombia’s 45-year-old internal armed conflict.

The government of President Juan Manuel Santos has expressed its commitment to passing legislation to facilitate the return of stolen lands to their rightful owners. But such efforts will fail unless the authorities can meet their international human rights obligations by adopting concrete measures to guarantee the safety of those campaigning for land rights, as well as of families seeking to return to their lands, many of whom have also been threatened and killed.

The new government must also set out in detail its overall strategy for ending the long-standing human rights crisis. An important first step would be for President Santos to make a public and unequivocal statement in support of the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders. The administration of President Uribe was marked by its hostility to human rights work, which contributed towards creating an environment which legitimized attacks against such activists.

The Colombian authorities must also ensure independent and thorough investigations are carried out to ensure that those responsible for these killings are brought to justice.