

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AMR 23/038/2008 (Public)
21 October 2008

Colombia: Killings of Indigenous and Afro-descendant land right activists must stop

Over the last month Indigenous communities in Colombia have staged large-scale demonstrations in protest at continued human rights abuses and in support of their right to land. These protests are part of a broader campaign, which have also involved Afro-descendant and peasant farmer communities, in support of their civil, political and economic, social and cultural rights.

In the last few days, some of these protests have turned violent and threaten to drown out the concerns the Indigenous movement are trying to highlight. There are reports that the anti-riot police (ESMAD) has used excessive force in dealing with demonstrators in Cauca Department, and that dozens of protestors have been injured, at least one of them fatally. There are also reports that dozens of members of the security forces have also been injured. Amnesty International condemns the use of excessive force by the security services, as well as any violence perpetrated by the demonstrators.

During Colombia's 40-year armed conflict, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant farmer communities living in conflict areas have repeatedly been the target of serious human rights abuses committed by the security forces, paramilitaries – either acting alone or with the collusion or acquiescence of the security forces – and guerrilla groups. These communities are often attacked because they are accused of aiding one or the other side in the conflict. Over the last five years, more than 1,000 Indigenous people have been killed. In the vast majority of cases, these killings have not been properly investigated nor have the perpetrators ever been brought to justice.

In Colombia, human rights abuses are frequently committed as a means to forcibly remove civilian communities from areas of economic interest, much of which is inhabited by Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. Since 1985 between 3 and 4 million civilians have been forcibly displaced from their homes and lands. Forced displacement has paved the way for the misappropriation of these lands, mostly by paramilitaries, but also by guerrilla groups. It is estimated that 4-6 million hectares of land may have been stolen by paramilitaries in this way. These lands are often in areas with mineral, oil or agro-industrial potential. Rather than guarantee the return of these stolen lands some government policies may be facilitating the legalization of ownership of these lands by paramilitary groups and their backers.

The human rights crisis facing the Indigenous population largely centres on its efforts to protect its land rights. The department of Cauca provides one dramatic example. This department in south-west Colombia is home to a large and well-organized Indigenous population and strong peasant farmer organizations; both have campaigned to secure land reform or press for land claims. In the course of these campaigns these movements have carried out numerous demonstrations, land occupations and other forms of mobilization to demand recognition of their land rights.

Repeatedly, however, these demonstrations have been treated as subversive by local state authorities, the security forces and the government. Such accusations have been repeatedly followed by killings, enforced disappearances and death threats carried out by paramilitary groups and the security forces. In August 2008 an anonymous death threat was circulated in Cauca

Department announcing that a process of “militarization and extermination” would take place against Indigenous leaders belonging to the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (*Consejo Regional del Cauca*, CRIC) and members of the Nasa Indigenous group. The Indigenous movement was accused of being terrorist, criminal and “significant allies” of the guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC). Since this threat was circulated there has been a spate of killings of and threats against Indigenous leaders and peasant farmer organizations in Cauca.

On 28 September 2008, Raúl Mendoza, governor of the Indigenous council (*cabildo*) “Peñon”, who was involved in the process of reclaiming land in the Los Naranjos farm (*finca*), municipality of Sotará, department of Cauca, was shot dead in his house in the city of Popayán.

On 13 October 2008, an Indigenous man, Cesar Hurtado Tróchez, from the Guadalito reservation in Cauca department, was shot dead by four men who burst into his house. On 12 October, Nicolás Valencia Lemus, the brother of a well-known Indigenous leader in Cauca was killed after being stopped on the road from El Palo to Toribío by members of the paramilitary group, the Black Eagles (*Aguilas Negras*). Before fleeing the scene, the killers wrote ‘Aguilas Negras’ on the windows of his car. On 11 October, the body of another Indigenous man, Celestino Rivera, from Jambaló, was found shot dead near the road from Toribío to Jambaló.

Amnesty International has also received information of numerous killings of Indigenous and Afro-descendant people in other parts of the country in recent months.

On 6 October 2008, three members of the Indigenous Embera Chamí community were killed and one injured by paramilitaries wearing armbands identifying them as ‘Black Eagles’, near the municipality of Ríosucio in the Department of Caldas. According to information received, members of the community had reported to the local authorities that in the days before these killings, flyers containing a list of more than 60 people, including Indigenous and other civilians who were being threatened by the same paramilitary group, had been circulated in the municipality.

On 26 May 2008, an Indigenous man, Oscar Dogirama Tequia, was killed by the FARC in the municipality of Ríosucio, the Department of Chocó. He was accused of being an army informant.

On 14 October 2008, Walberto Hoyos Rivas, a leader of the Afro-descendant community of the Curvaradó River Basin in Chocó Department was killed by paramilitaries in the Humanitarian Zone of Caño Manso. Walberto Hoyos had been active in seeking the protection of collective land rights for the Afro-descendant communities of the Curvaradó River Basin and had survived a previous attempt on his life and that of his brother on 17 September 2007. He was about to give testimony in the trial of two paramilitaries implicated in the killing of another community leader.

In recent weeks, the killings of Indigenous and Afro-descendant activists have been coupled with attacks against those campaigning for the economic, social and cultural rights of peasant farmers.

The Colombian authorities must order full and impartial investigations into these attacks against members of Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant farmer communities and bring those responsible to justice. The security forces and guerrilla groups must also respect the right of all civilians, including those campaigning for land rights, not to be dragged into the conflict.

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