

## Web feature

### **Colombia: Time to stop the killing and persecution of trade unionists and activists**

Index: AMR 23/019/2006

Date: 1/05/2006

Four decades of armed conflict in Colombia have had a catastrophic effect on the country's civilians. Caught between the security forces who have consistently colluded with and supported paramilitary groups and, on the other side, armed opposition groups, tens of thousands of people have been killed, "disappeared", tortured or kidnapped, while millions of others have been forcibly displaced.

The country's trade union movement is not just engaged in campaigning for workers' rights and against privatisation, but is also at the forefront of the fight for human rights and social justice. As a result of this work, trade union leaders and members have been key targets of violence, accused by the security forces or their paramilitary allies of revolutionary activities. Armed opposition groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) have also been responsible for human rights abuses against trade unionists.

Over 750 trade unionists have been killed since 2000 and at least a hundred more have been "disappeared". In 2005 alone, 73 trade unionists were either killed or "disappeared", while over 200 received death threats. Most recently, Héctor Díaz Serrano, a member of the oil workers' union Unión Sindical Obrera (USO), was shot while he was on his way to work on 2 March 2006. That morning, the newspaper Vanguardia Liberal had reported that a paramilitary group calling itself the Magdalena Medio Regional Command (Comando Regional del Magdalena Medio) had issued a statement in which it threatened to kill trade unionists and other social activists running for Congress in the 12 March 2006 elections.

Over recent years, Amnesty International (AI) has also documented many cases of arbitrary detentions of trade unionists and other social and human rights activists by the security forces. These detentions have often been based solely on the evidence of paid military informers and not on impartial investigations by the judicial authorities. Many of these activists have subsequently been released for lack of evidence, but some have been killed or threatened shortly after their release. This has raised fears that the security forces are deliberately undermining the legitimate work of trade unionists by discrediting their work through judicial proceedings and, failing this, through physical attack, more often than not carried out by paramilitaries.

On International Workers' Day, AI is remembering the plight of Colombian trade unionists who have borne the brunt of the armed conflict by highlighting the case of trade unionists in the department of Arauca, an oil-rich area in the north east of the country. Samuel Morales and Raquel Castro were arrested on 5 August 2004 and charged with "rebellion" in January 2005. Three other trade unionists -- Héctor Alirio Martínez, Leonel Goyeneche and Jorge Prieto -- were shot and killed by the army in the same operation.

Subsequent investigations have revealed that the three were forced out of a house and shot in the back by soldiers. The investigations revealed that claims they had opened fire on the troops were untrue and four soldiers and a civilian have been charged with the killing. However, despite the clear doubts this casts on their arrests, Samuel Morales and Raquel Castro remain in prison.

Raquel Castro is a member of the Teachers' Association of Arauca, whose leaders have been the target of raids and arbitrary detentions by the security forces and repeated death threats and killings by army-backed paramilitaries. Samuel Morales is a former teacher and is the regional president of the Colombian Trade Union Confederation in Arauca.

During his time in prison, Samuel Morales and his family have received death threats. On 29 July 2005, while he was in custody at a police station in the Arauca town of Saravena, the station commander is reported to have told him that he knew where his sisters Omayra, Gladys and Matilde Morales worked and where to find his wife. Police officers are reported to have pressured the director of a local hospital to dismiss Samuel's wife simply because she is married to him.

On 21 September 2005, between 10 and 10.30am, the secretary at the school where Gladys and Omayra Morales were working received a telephone call from a man who said he was from the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia). He told her to tell Gladys and Omayra Morales that they had 72 hours to leave the department, that members of Mr Samuel Morales's family are their military target and they must disappear from Arauca.

The secretary at the school where Matilde was working in Arauquita Municipality received a similar telephone death threat between 10.30 and 11am.

AI fears that Samuel and Raquel's arrest are part of an ongoing joint military-paramilitary strategy to undermine the invaluable work carried out by trade unionists, human rights defenders and other social activists in Arauca. Even if released, they will be in danger of being killed by those who have threatened Samuel and his family.

Only decisive action to bring to justice those responsible for human rights abuses against trade unionists will have a significant impact on the human rights crisis faced by trade unions in Colombia. At present, there is impunity in over 90% of cases of human rights abuses against trade unionists.

AI calls on the international trade union movement to continue to show solidarity with their colleagues in Colombia and to insist that their own governments put pressure on the Colombian authorities to take measures to stop the killings and the persecution of trade unionists and activists.

Link to:

Colombia: Fear for safety: Trade unionists and social activists in Barrancabermeja, Department of Santander

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