

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public statement

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### Colombia: Civilian population is the target of massacres

The murder of 34 apparent "*raspachines*" (coca gatherers) on 15 June 2004 on the Río Chiquito farm in the La Gabarra area of the municipality of Tibú, department of Norte de Santander, which was attributed to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and who have - according to press reports - claimed responsibility, is yet another example of the blatant disregard in which human rights and international humanitarian law are held by the armed groups, whether guerrilla, paramilitary or even government forces.

According to witnesses, a large number of heavily armed men entered the farm at 5.30 in the morning. Upon entering, they overpowered the peasant farmers, tying their hands and feet with rope. They were apparently accused of being paramilitary allies and then shot in the back of the head. Two children were among the dead.

Such killings of defenceless civilians are in grave violation of the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and constitute a war crime. Amnesty International renounces and condemns this violence, and insists that those responsible be brought to justice.

Unfortunately, this massacre is just one of many to have taken place in recent months and is unlikely to be the last in the armed conflict that has been menacing Colombia for the last 40 years. The continual violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law on the part of all armed groups, along with the implementation of government policies that are often in violation of international law, are encouraging spiralling political violence in Colombia.

#### Guaitarilla – Nariño department

On 19 March 2004, seven police officers from the Unified Action Group for Personal Freedom (*Grupo de Acción Unificada por la Libertad Personal* - Gaula) and four civilians died in Plan Grande, Guaitarilla municipality, in the north-west of Nariño department. They were apparently killed by members of the Boyacá Battalion of the Colombian army.

Military sources state that the soldiers were at a military post in the settlement when they ordered the police officers to halt. According to the army, not only did they not obey this order but the policemen responded with gunfire. The army's response to this apparent aggression was to return fire, causing the deaths of the victims. Preliminary investigations have established that the victims appear to have received multiple gunshot wounds, some at close range. Last month, information submitted to Congress indicated that the evidence may have been manipulated.

#### Cajamarca – Tolima department

On 10 April 2004, five civilians, including a six-month-old baby, lost their lives in Potosí, Cajamarca municipality, Tolima department. They were killed by shots fired during a military operation being undertaken by troops from the Pijaos Battalion. The soldiers admitted firing on the peasants. According to

the army, bad weather and the distance between themselves and the victims led to this error and "they were mistaken for the guerrillas who were lurking in the area."

Statements from the different soldiers involved in the incident showed various inconsistencies. Moreover, ballistic tests would show that at least one of the victims had been shot at a range of less than 60 centimetres.

The Human Rights Ombudsman recently confirmed that witnesses to the Cajamarca and Guaitarilla massacres, along with the relatives of those involved, had received threats. According to the acting Human Rights Ombudsman, Darío Mejía, "If anything should happen to the witnesses in the Guaitarilla and Cajamarca cases, it would be the State's responsibility."

Investigations into the Guaitarilla and Cajamarca massacres were undertaken by the military criminal justice system, which has become an extremely effective instrument in protecting those responsible for human rights violations, preventing them from being tried or sentenced.

#### **Bahía Portete - Guajira department**

On 18 April 2004, after several days of threatening to enter the area, paramilitaries reportedly raided the indigenous community of Bahía Portete, in the department of Guajira, whose inhabitants are members of the indigenous Wayúu people.

They apparently questioned a number of children about the whereabouts of their parents, and killed at least 12 people. They are reported to have tortured a number of adults before killing them. Several of the victims were dismembered. The paramilitaries also abducted several people, including Diana Fince Uriana, Reina Fince Pushinana, aged 13, and another 11-year-old girl. It has not been possible to determine the exact number of people abducted. Their whereabouts, and whether they are dead or alive, remains unknown. More than 500 Wayúu proceeded to seek refuge across the border in Venezuela.

#### **Tame – Arauca department**

On 19 May 2004, around 200 men, apparently members of the paramilitary group United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* - AUC), closed the Los Libertadores road between Saravena and Tame, preventing the movement of the area's peasant farmers for a day. They then raided five communities in the municipality of Tame: Flor Amarillo, Piñalito, Botalón, Cravo Charo and Los Andes. During these raids, the paramilitaries abducted and tortured a number of people. Eleven peasant farmers were reportedly killed, six of whom were captured in Flor Amarillo and the other five in Cravo Charo.

These massacres are examples of the tragic reality faced by the civilian population of Colombia every day. They clearly demonstrate that the most vulnerable and defenceless people continue to be the target of the violence engendered by this conflict. The civilian population continues to be the principle victim of the cruelty and violence meted out by all groups involved in the conflict. It is the civilian population which continues to suffer the pain of selective killings, "disappearances", abductions and massacres.

Amnesty International urges all those involved in the conflict to put an end to these violations of international humanitarian law and, particularly, to respect the fundamental rights of the civilian population.

Amnesty International urges the Colombian government to guarantee the safety of all Colombians, taking measures that will truly protect the civilian population and remove it from the armed conflict. The government also has the duty and responsibility to undertake independent and impartial investigations into each and every massacre, bringing those responsible to justice through the ordinary courts and making the results of this process public. The guerrilla leaders must, for their part, order all combatants to comply with international humanitarian law, which specifically prohibits any party to an armed conflict from attacking those not directly involved in the hostilities.