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Colombia: human rights defenders' offices close in climate of terror

The closure of several offices of human rights groups across Colombia in recent days is yet another sign of the climate of fear and insecurity in which Colombian human rights defenders are forced to live, Amnesty International said today.

“It is clear that despite its promises the Colombian government has failed to take effective measures to protect human rights defenders, including the dismantling of paramilitary organizations,” Amnesty International said.

“The Colombian government must listen to the demands of human rights workers and It is take decisive action to ensure that they can carry out their vital work.”

The closure of the Trujillo regional office of the Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace, announced today, comes as a result of recent death threats, intimidation and harassment against its workers, reportedly by paramilitary groups.

The Commission of Justice and Peace (CIJP) and the Association of the Relatives of the Victims of Trujillo (AFAVIT) have tirelessly campaigned for justice in the cases of over 100 farmers in the area who “disappeared” or were killed by security forces and paramilitaries between 1989 and 1990.

“The armed forces and their paramilitary allies have frequently labelled the activities of human rights defenders as subversive, in an attempt to discredit their work and present them as legitimate targets in the counterinsurgency war,” Amnesty International said.

“At the forefront of the campaign to seek truth and justice, human rights defenders are increasingly the target of serious abuses by perpetrators seeking to protect their impunity.”

The announcement of the closure of the CIJP office follows a spate of killings of and death threats against human rights defenders throughout the country.

On Tuesday this week, the Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners (CSPP), another national human rights organization, also announced the closure of their offices. The closure followed the killing of two of the organization's workers on 30 January 1999 in the department of Antioquia.

Yesterday saw the release of two human rights defenders working for the Popular Training Institute (IPC), who had been abducted by paramilitaries on 28 January 1999. However, serious concerns for the safety of IPC workers remain.

On 1 February 1999, Carlos Castaño, head of the national paramilitary organization Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), openly threatened all Colombian human rights defenders, describing the recent abductions as “the beginning of a regrettable, but inevitable stage in the conflict” against insurgency.

Background

In the last two years more than 20 Colombian human rights defenders have been targeted and killed by members of the security forces or their paramilitary allies. In many cases they are targeted because of their work in poor neighbourhoods and communities of people forcibly displaced by political violence, or because of their work to expose atrocities and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Despite commitments to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders made in December last year by President Andrés Pastrana to the United Nations, and reaffirmed on 28 January 1999 by Vice-President Gustavo Bell in a meeting with Amnesty International’s Secretary General, the recent killings, threats and abductions of human rights defenders show that effective action still has to be taken.

On 28 January 1999, IPC workers Jairo Bedoya, Olga Rodas, Claudia Tamayo and Jorge Salazar, were abducted by the AUC. Olga Rodas and Claudia Tamayo were released on 8 February and Jairo Bedoya and Jorge Salazar were released on 17 February following a national and international outcry.

Everardo de Jesús Puertas and Julio Ernesto González of the CSPP, an internationally respected non-governmental human rights organization, were travelling from Medellín to Bogotá on 30 January 1999 when their bus was stopped in Doradal, Antioquia Department, by two heavily armed men and a woman, who picked out the two men and shot them dead. CSPP workers have previously suffered serious human rights violations by paramilitary groups. The CSPP told President Pastrana that they would not reopen their offices until the government took effective measures to guarantee the safety of human rights workers.

On 18 January 1999, a known informer for paramilitary groups and the security forces reportedly came to the offices of AFAVIT and the Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace in Trujillo to intimidate human rights workers by openly spying on them. On 27 January 1999, Francisco Javier Trujillo, an AFAVIT member, received a written death threat against him and “your friends in the Justice and Peace Commission”.

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Names:

- III. Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace / *Comisión Intercongregacional de Derechos Humanos de Justicia y Paz*
- IV. Association of the Relatives of the Victims of Trujillo / *Asociación de Familiares de Víctimas de Trujillo*
- V. Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners / *Comité de Solidaridad de Presos Políticos*
- VI. Self-Defence Forces of Colombia / *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*