

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety

08 January 2003

COLOMBIA

**Henry Palomo (m), vice-president of ASODESAMUBA
Members of the CIMITARRA peasant association, in the Magdalena Medio**

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of Henry Palomo after he was reportedly abducted on 23rd December and tortured by army backed paramilitaries. There are also fears for the safety of members of the CIMITARRA peasant association in the Magdalena Medio region who are also at risk.

At 12pm, Henry Paolomo, vice-president of ASODESAMUBA, an association for displaced people in Barrancabermeja, department of Santander was seized by six men at the port of Las Escalas in Barrancabermeja. They identified themselves as members from the *Bloque Central Bolívar*, Central Bolívar Block of the army-backed paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, (AUC), United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia. A permanent police checkpoint is just two minutes away at Puerto Aguila.

The men assaulted Henry Palomo and forced him into a canoe. They took him to Caño Cardales, in the Arenal neighbourhood where according to reports, paramilitaries have previously detained, tortured and killed people from the region, the majority peasant farmers. During his interrogation, the paramilitaries allegedly further beat and intimidated him, while questioning him about his activities. They found an invitation for a human rights event in one of his pockets. When they saw that the *Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra*, Peasant Association of the Cimitarra River Valley, Magdalena Medio region was also one of the organizations invited to this event, one of them said: "Son of a bitch if you are a member of this guerrilla organization, which pretend to be just peasants and for human rights, we will kill you because those sons of bitches do not get another chance and the order is to kill them where we see them". "*Perro hijoeputa si usted es de esa organización de guerrilleros que se pasan por campesinos y por Derechos Humanos, lo vamos a matar por que esos hijeputas no tiene rebaja y la orden es matarlos donde los veamos*".

Henry Palomo had with him an emergency radio telephone provided by government human rights officials for his protection. He was able to alert the Regional Human Rights Ombudsman of Magdalena Medio about his situation, who immediately informed the police. The police found his whereabouts and rescued him. Amnesty International has not received information as to whether his paramilitary captors have been detained. Since the abduction, Henry Palomo has been forced to flee for fear of reprisal.

Fears for the safety of members of the Peasant Association of the Cimitarra River Valley have been raised in the past by Amnesty International, most recently in UA 221/01 update (AMR 23/103/2002, 9 September 2002). Despite repeated denunciations by human rights organizations no effective governmental action has been taken to dismantle the army-backed paramilitaries operating in the area.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Barrancabermeja is under siege by army-backed paramilitaries who control entire areas of the city, despite the large presence of the security forces. Guerrilla forces are also active in the city. Trade unionists, human rights defenders and other social activists have frequently been harassed, tortured and killed, often by paramilitaries who together with the security and armed forces have often accused them of being guerrilla sympathizers.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of Henry Palomo and the members of the Peasant Association of the Cimitarra River Valley, in the Magdalena Medio Region in the Santander department;

- calling for an investigation into the abduction and torture of Henry Palomo at the hands of army-backed paramilitaries;
- expressing concern about the increasing army-backed paramilitary presence in the region and urging the authorities to take action to protect the civilian population;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in Santander Department, urging that the results are made public and those found responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with the United Nations recommendations.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

Señor Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
 Carrera 8 No.7-26
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegram: **Presidente de la República, Bogotá, Colombia**

Fax: **+ 57 1 342 0592**

Salutation: **Excmo. Sr. Presidente Uribe / Dear President Uribe**

Minister of the Interior and Justice

Sr. Fernando Londoño Hoyos,
 Ministro del Interior y de Justicia
 Ministerio del Interior
 Palacio Echeverry, Carrera 8a, No.8-09, piso 2o.
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegram: **Ministro Interior, Bogota, Colombia**

Fax: **+ 57 1 566 4573**

Salutation: **Dear Sir / Sr. Ministro**

National Advocate for the people

Sr. Eduardo Cifuentes Muñoz,
 Defensor del Pueblo, Defensoría del Pueblo,
 Calle 55, No. 10-32/46 office 301,
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Fax: **+ 57 1 640 0491**

Salutation: **Estimado Sr. Cifuentes Muñoz / Dear Mr. Cifuentes Muñoz**

COPIES TO:

Non governmental organisation

Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra (ACVC), Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley

Calle 47 N°6-108, Of.202
 Barrancabermeja, Santander, Colombia

and to diplomatic representatives of Colombia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 19 February 2003.