

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety/Death threats

20 January 2005

COLOMBIA Yolanda Becerra (f), President of the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP),  
Popular Women's Organization  
Other OFP members

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Human rights activist Yolanda Becerra has been threatened by a paramilitary group, and Amnesty International believes her life is in danger.

Yolanda Becerra is the President of the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP), Popular Women's Organization, based in Barrancabermeja, department of Santander, which campaigns for human rights, in particular women's rights.

It has just been reported that on 24 December 2004 witnesses overheard a member of a paramilitary group operating in Barrancabermeja, talking about Yolanda Becerra: "*esa hijueputa es muy de buenas, se salva ... de mis manos. Junto con otro compañero desde hace un mes soy el responsable de hacerle seguimiento ... tuve la oportunidad de asesinarla, estaba sin los internacionales ... Hoy estoy arrepentido de no actuar, esa hijueputa es un problema que ya hubiéramos podido acabar*". (That bitch is very lucky, she escaped from my grasp. I and another man were told to follow up on her for the last month ... I had the opportunity to kill her, she was without the *internacionales* ... Today I regret I did not act, that bitch is a problem we could have finished off) *Internacionales* is thought to be a reference to Peace Brigades International (PBI), an organization that provides unarmed accompaniment to threatened human rights defenders in Colombia, including Yolanda Becerra, to protect them from attack.

On 1 January, gunmen travelling in a car and on motorbikes arrived in the Nuevo Palmira district of Barrancabermeja. A passerby asked them what was happening and the gunmen apparently said they had received reports that there were "strange people" (*personas raras*) in the neighbourhood. They left, saying they would return. At the time Yolanda Becerra was visiting her mother in the Nuevo Palmira area, accompanied by PBI volunteers.

Yolanda Becerra and other OFP members have been repeatedly threatened by army-backed paramilitary groups over the past four years. In January 2004 Inés Peña was reportedly abducted and tortured by paramilitary gunmen. (For details, see UA 144/02, AMR 23/055/2002, 13 May 2002 and follow-ups). On 2 December 2004, a youth, allegedly a former member of one of the paramilitary groups operating in Barrancabermeja, went into the OFP communal kitchen in the La Estrella de Cedritos district and told the OFP activists that they were running a risk by campaigning for human rights. He referred to signs they had displayed as part of their campaign against violence against women: "*¿qué les pasaría si ustedes llegaran un día y les dejan una caja con una bomba y las matan a todas por estar diciendo esas cosas?*" (what will happen to you if you arrive one day and they leave you a box with a bomb in it and they kill all of you for saying these things?) On 3 December a parcel was left outside the kitchen: local people thought it might contain a bomb, but it was later found to be a hoax.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

An internal conflict has raged in Colombia over the last four decades between guerrilla forces and government security forces. The armed forces' counter-insurgency strategy has relied heavily on paramilitary groups to implement their "dirty war" tactics, which include torture, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions. Their targets are supposedly guerrillas or suspected guerrillas, but they often apply this label to people such as trade unionists and human rights activists that they want to silence. Guerrilla forces have intimidated or killed people they accuse of collaborating with their enemies, including human rights defenders, and have engaged in kidnapping and hostage-taking.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Yolanda Becerra and other OFP activists in Barrancabermeja and other parts of Santander and Bolívar Departments;
- urging the authorities to ensure that all measures deemed appropriate by them are taken to guarantee their safety;
- calling for full and impartial investigations into the threats made against OFP members in recent months, including against Yolanda Becerra described above, for the results to be made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- expressing concern that the government has taken no effective action against paramilitary groups in the Barrancabermeja area, despite UN recommendations to combat and dismantle these groups;
- 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 that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice.

**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

**Fax: + 57 1 337 5890/342 0592**

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

Minister of the Interior and Justice

Sr. Sabas Pretelt de la Vega,

Ministro del Interior y de Justicia

Ministerio del Interior, Av. Jiménez No 8-89

Bogotá, Colombia

**Fax: +57 1 560 4630**

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

Attorney General

Dr. Luis Camilo Osorio

Fiscal General de la Nación

Fiscalía General de la Nación

Diagonal 22B 52-01 (Ciudad Salite)

Bogotá, Colombia

**Fax: + 57 1 570 2000 (a message in Spanish will ask you to enter extension 2017)**

**Salutation: Dear Dr. Osorio / Estimado Dr. Osorio**

**COPIES TO:**

NGO

*Organización Femenina Popular*

Cra 22 No 52B – 36, 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 2 March 2005.