

COLOMBIA Civilian population in the districts of Kennedy, Progreso and Las Granjas in Barrancabermeja

Army-backed paramilitaries, who recently raided three districts in Barrancabermeja, are threatening to attack parts of the city where displaced civilians are sheltering. They have said they will kill civilians who refuse to work for them.

A group of 40 paramilitary gunmen have reportedly said that on 27 and 28 January they will enter the districts of Kennedy, Progreso and Las Granjas in northwestern Barrancabermeja, Santander department.

This threat follows a 20 January raid on the districts of Altos del Campestre, Minas del Paraíso and María Eugenia in southeastern Barrancabermeja. On this day, armed paramilitaries came to the district where they harassed the civilian population. They reportedly held the local population at gunpoint and told them:

"We have come to stay. We are creating employment... and anyone who doesn't want to work for us, simply won't be forced to, but will be killed... If you denounce us to the police or army... we don't care as the army and police support us, because we are achieving what they have failed to achieve in twenty years."

Police officers in a nearby armoured vehicle (*tanquero*) took no action to protect the civilians from the group of paramilitary gunmen.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This year alone the United Nations Human Rights Office in Colombia has received information about 26 massacres committed in 11 departments, in which more than 170 people have been killed, most of them by paramilitary groups.

There has been an increased presence of paramilitary forces in Barrancabermeja since December 2000 (See UA 340/00, AMR 23/90/00, 6 November 2000 and follow-up). Despite a heavy security force presence in the area, paramilitary forces have apparently been able to operate unhindered, and are reported to have set up checkpoints and to have killed several people in recent weeks. Although the precise location of these checkpoints have been reported to the security forces, they have taken no action to confront the paramilitaries.

In 1998, a paramilitary raid on Barrancabermeja, during which seven people were killed and 25 "disappeared", drew international condemnation. (See *Barrancabermeja: A City under Siege*, AI Index: AMR 23/36/99, May 1999 for details of this and other attacks on the city). The UN has repeatedly recommended that the Colombian government take action to combat and dismantle paramilitary groups. However, the authorities have failed to take effective action against either the paramilitary groups operating in the region, or the elements within the security forces who collaborate with them. On the contrary, members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. As recent events have shown, official inaction continues to leave civilians at risk.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of civilians in the districts of Kennedy, Progreso and Las Granjas in Barrancabermeja city, after paramilitaries have threatened to raid these districts;
- expressing concern that the government has taken no real action against paramilitary groups in the Barrancabermeja area, despite their own commitments and UN recommendations to combat and dismantle these groups;
- urging a full and impartial investigation to be carried out into the recent raids on the districts of Altos del Campestre, Minas del Paraíso and María Eugenia, and for the results to be made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the department of Santander, urging that the results are made public, and that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate and decisive action to combat and dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with repeated government commitments and United Nations recommendations.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

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 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
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 Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Fax: + 57 1 336 2109 / 337 1351

Salutation: Dear President / Excmo. Sr. Presidente

Minister of Defence

Dr. Luis Fernando Ramírez Acuña
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegram: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

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Salutation: Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro

Minister of Foreign Relations

Dr. Guillermo Fernández de Soto
 Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores
 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Palacio San Carlos
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

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Salutation: Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro

COPIES TO:

Non-governmental organisationa

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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 9 March 2001.