

**PUBLIC**

**AI Index: AMR 23/011/2003**

**UA 28/03**

**Fear for safety/Threats**

**28 January 2003**

**COLOMBIA**

**Civilians in El Castillo municipality, Meta department**

**Killed: Luis Eduardo Serna (m)**

**Luis Sánchez (m)**

**Three men, names unknown**

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Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of civilians living in El Castillo municipality, Meta department. According to local sources, a number of killings have been carried out and death threats have been made by army-backed paramilitaries operating in and around the municipality. The threats have forced around fifty families to leave their homes in the area in recent weeks. The army, although present in the area, has apparently failed to take action against the paramilitaries.

On 7 January, two paramilitaries reportedly forced Luis Eduardo Serna off the bus on which he was travelling and killed him in the La Bodega area, El Castillo municipality. He had reportedly been threatened by paramilitaries who had given him 20 days to leave his home in the community of El Jardín, El Castillo municipality. He was fleeing his home when he was killed. On the same day paramilitaries reportedly killed three unidentified men in the community of La Cabaña in the municipality. Their bodies were reportedly abandoned in a park in the municipal capital, El Castillo.

On 9 January at approximately 2.00pm, paramilitaries reportedly arrived in the community of Caño Claro, where they killed Luis Sánchez, a peasant farmer. The paramilitaries reportedly shot him in the legs and then stabbed him in the heart and neck. On the night when a wake was being held in his memory, unidentified gunmen reportedly forced their way into his house and carried out a search.

Despite the presence of the *Batallón No.21 Vargas*, No 21 Battalion Vargas of the Colombian Army in the region, paramilitaries reportedly maintain a permanent presence in the communities of La Macarena, Caño Claro, El Encanto, Puerto Esperanza and Campoalegre. In the communities of El Retiro, La Floresta and La Esperanza paramilitaries have threatened civilians and ordered civilians to abandon the region. Around fifty families have reportedly fled their homes as a result of these threats.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The build-up of paramilitaries in the municipality of El Castillo has reportedly taken place over several months, despite the presence of the Colombian Army. On 1 August 2002, paramilitary forces reportedly entered the communities of La Macarena and El Jardín in the municipality. They forced the inhabitants to assemble and told them that the paramilitaries were going to remain in the area. At the time army units were reportedly situated 30 minutes' drive away in the municipal capital, El Castillo. On 9 August, the armed forces allegedly carried out a large-scale military operation in the area during which military units were reported to be patrolling jointly with paramilitary forces.

On 8 September, paramilitaries allegedly forced inhabitants of Puerto Esperanza to assemble for a meeting, despite the presence of the *Batallón No.21 Vargas* in nearby La Cima. A paramilitary member who addressed the meeting identified himself as a member of the paramilitary organization *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, (AUC), United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia. Peasant farmers living in conflict zones are frequently labelled as subversive by the armed forces and their paramilitary allies. These accusations have frequently been followed by serious human rights violations committed by paramilitaries and death threats which have led to forced displacement. Guerrilla forces have also killed and threatened peasant farmers in conflict zones they accuse of collaborating with the security forces or their paramilitary allies.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of the civilian population of the municipality of El Castillo, department of Meta;
- calling for an investigation into the killings of Luis Eduardo Serna, Luis Sánchez and at least three other people in recent weeks;
- 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 Meta 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 recommendations made by the United Nations.

**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:     Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister**

Minister of Defence

Ministra de Defensa Nacional  
Martha Lucía Ramírez de Rincon  
Ministerio de Defensa Nacional  
Avenida El Dorado - Carrera 52 OFI. 217  
Centro Administrativo Nacional (CAN)  
Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegram:       Ministra Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia**

**Fax:               + 57 1 266 0193**

**Salutation:     Sra Ministra/Dear Minister**

**COPIES TO:**

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

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 11 March 2003.