

Colombia

"Take care of your children or you won't see them again": Trade Unionists subjected to death threats in the department of Arauca.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of trade unionists and other human rights defenders in the department of Arauca, after receiving information of death threats apparently made by army-backed paramilitaries in the region.

Fears for their safety are further heightened by the fact that they have frequently been labelled as guerrillas or guerrilla collaborators by members of the security forces. In the past such accusations have often been followed by serious human rights violations committed by paramilitary groups.

Army-backed paramilitary forces have been able to consolidate their presence in the department of Arauca despite the large presence of the security forces in the department. Paramilitary forces have reportedly been able to operate checkpoints in close proximity to military positions for prolonged periods of time. Security force personnel have threatened civilian communities with paramilitary incursions. Despite reports of limited confrontations between the security forces and paramilitaries, the paramilitary forces continue to operate in areas known to the authorities. These operations may have been designed to disguise the strong links between the security forces and paramilitaries.

In September 2002, according to information received, the army-backed paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, (AUC), United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, threatened trade unionists. The paramilitaries accused them of links to subversive groups and declared them to be military objectives of their units. (*Existen algunas personas, sindicalistas, directores, comprometidos con grupos subversivos, estos líderes son declarados objetivo militar de nuestras unidades*). This death threat was received on 11 September by electricity workers of the *Empresa de Energía de Arauca (ENELAR ESP)*, Arauca Energy Company, and follows two previous death threats. In the first, dated 6 July, the AUC stated that the identities of more than 150 workers in the municipal capitals of Tame, Forul, Arauquita, Fortul, Cravo Norte, Puerto Rondón and the surrounding rural areas are known to them (*están plenamente identificados más de 150 trabajadores de Arauca y cabeceras Municipales de Tame, Forul, Arauquita, Fortul, Cravo y Rondón, y sus áreas rurales*). On 7 July, in an emailed death threat sent to the company, the AUC threatened employees and members of the Arauca Branch of the Colombian electricity workers union *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Electricidad de Colombia* (SINTRAELECOL): "Bosses, trade unionists and some workers...you are warned that you have to resign immediately, if not you will have to face up

to the consequences” (“*Jefes, sindicalistas y algunos trabajadores...se les advierte que tienen que renunciar de manera inmediata, de lo contrario deberán atenerse a las consecuencias*”).

On 12, 17 and 19 November 2002, the home of **Jorge Prieto**, the President of ANTHOC – Arauca (The Health Workers Union), was reportedly searched by members of the army, together with representatives of the Office of the Attorney General, without a judicial warrant. At the time his house was searched, one of the directors and four other ANTHOC union members were detained. In the days before his house was searched, Jorge Prieto had reportedly denounced the ransacking of the centre of the Community Action Group (allanada de forma violenta). The headquarters of ANTHOC-Arauca have also, reportedly been searched without a warrant.

Death threats have also been made against members of the teacher’s union *Asociación de Educadores de Arauca*, ASEDAR, Teacher’s Association of Arauca. On 18 March 2003, **Raquel Galvis**, a member of ASEDAR who lives in the municipality of Arauquita, received a telephoned death threat. The caller identified himself as a member of the paramilitary organization, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC, United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia and warned her that if she came across a paramilitary checkpoint she would be killed. The next day **Jaime Ernesto Carrillo** president of ASEDAR received a written death threat: “*Cuide a sus hijos o no los volverá a ver*”, “Take care of your children or you won’t see them again”. The death threat was pushed under the door of his house in Arauca, capital of the department, it was brought to his attention as he attended a meeting with AI delegates.

The most recent threats follow mass arrests and detentions in November 2002 in the municipality of Saravena when around 2000 people were rounded up by the security forces and forced into the local sports stadium where they were questioned before release and 85 people, including trade unionists, civic and youth leaders were detained. They were reportedly filmed and paraded before the press as members of the armed opposition groups, the ELN and the FARC. They were prevented from seeing their lawyers until the next day. These and other similar mass arrests carried out in Arauca and other parts of the country in recent months are part of security force operations in which representatives of the Office of the Attorney General have been present. These agents often sign arrest and search warrants *in situ*, relying on the suspicions of the security forces or informers and not on the basis of legal investigations.

AI is concerned that trade unionists and other human rights defenders in the department of Arauca are facing a coordinated military-paramilitary strategy to label them and their organizations as subversive, thereby exposing them to arbitrary judicial proceedings and risk of violent attack by paramilitary groups.

TAKE ACTION NOW!

Please send appeals

- Expressing concern for the safety of trade union members of the Arauca Branch SINTRAELECOL, ANTHOC and ASEDAR, and other trade unionists in the department of Arauca, following reports of paramilitary threats against them;
- Urging that all measures, deemed appropriate by those under threat themselves, are taken to guarantee their safety;
- Urging that full and impartial investigations into these threats are undertaken, that the results are made public and that those responsible are brought to justice;
- Calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in Arauca Department, and asking that the results of the investigation 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 UN and other intergovernmental organizations.

Send them 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 1 566 2071 / 342 0592

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

Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia

Vicepresidente de la República de Colombia

Dr. Francisco Santos Calderón

Vicepresidencia

Carrera 8A No 5-57

Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Telegrams: Vice-Presidente Bell, Bogotá, Colombia

Fax: + 57 1 334 1138

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Vicepresidente/ Dear Vice-President

Send appeals to your own government

- Urging that decisive action is taken by the Colombian authorities to guarantee the security of trade unionists in Colombia, including trade unionists in Arauca Department, urging full and impartial investigations into killings and death threats against trade unionists in Arauca Department, and urging your government to support the call for an investigating commission at the International Labour Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO).
- Urging your government to inform you of what efforts it is taking in this respect.

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