

UA 125/99 Fear for safety / possible "disappearance"/ extrajudicial execution 2 June 1999

COLOMBIA Killed: Jorge Camilo González Prada (45), Gerardo Berbesi (65), Rafael Claros (26) and two others; possibly a further 15 people
Disappeared: possibly 15 people

A large paramilitary force has surrounded the rural district of La Gabarra, killing at least five local peasant farmers, threatening to attack the community and refusing to let the inhabitants leave. Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of the civilian population of the area.

On 29 May 1999 a heavily armed, 400-strong paramilitary force set up a number of checkpoints on the road leading from La Gabarra, in Norte de Santander department, to the municipal capital, Tibú. The gunmen stopped local people travelling on the road and reportedly killed five local peasant farmers: Jorge Camilo González Prada (a community leader of the nearby village of Palmeras), Gerardo Berbesi, Rafael Claros and two others. On 1 June the local *Defensor del Pueblo*, People's Ombudsman, reported that the gunmen had killed up to 20 people at the checkpoint and abducted a further 15. The paramilitaries reportedly warned those detained at the checkpoint that they intended to take control of La Gabarra by executing all those they considered to be guerrilla sympathizers or collaborators in the district.

On 30 May the national paramilitary leader, Carlos Castaño, reportedly visited one of the checkpoints by helicopter and told those present that he would control La Gabarra "no matter how many people have to be killed" (*sin importar las personas que tendré que ejecutar*).

The Bishop of Tibú, who has been prevented from leaving La Gabarra, says the community is being held hostage by the paramilitary force, who refuse to allow anyone to leave or enter the area.

The military and police maintain a strong presence in the area, including checkpoints on the road to La Gabarra. However, the authorities have taken no action to combat the paramilitary group or protect the civilian population. The paramilitary group apparently arrived in the area in at least 6 trucks, passing unhindered by military and police posts. There is reportedly a military checkpoint between two of the paramilitary checkpoints on the La Gabarra road, from which the arrival of paramilitary helicopters would have been plainly visible. There are also reports that those stopped at the paramilitary checkpoints have been temporarily detained by the military and police and threatened with death if they attempt to report the paramilitary groups activities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Peasant communities in disputed zones in Colombia's long running civil conflict have frequently suffered human rights violations. Neither the armed forces and their paramilitary allies nor the left-wing armed opposition groups recognize the civilian population's neutrality in the conflict.

Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. Over the past five years several thousand civilians have been killed by paramilitary groups throughout the country. The Colombian Government suspended the constitutional legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the

armed forces to combat and disband such groups in 1989, yet they continue to work with the support of the security forces in many areas of the country.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of the civilian population of the municipality of Tibú, Norte de Santander department, particularly those in La Gabarra district, which has been surrounded by paramilitary forces;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to guarantee the safety of the inhabitants;
- calling for prompt, full and impartial investigations into the reported killing on 29 May 1999 of Jorge Camilo González Prada, Gerardo Berbesi, Rafael Claros and two other unidentified individuals by paramilitary forces in the area, and also into reports that the same forces are responsible for killing at least 15 other local inhabitants and possibly abducting a further 15;
- urging that the results of the investigations be made public and that the perpetrators be brought to justice;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the municipality of Tibú and urging that those found responsible for supporting and participating in such groups be brought to justice;
- urging that the authorities take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments.

APPEALS TO:

President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana
 Presidente de la República

Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: President Pastrana, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 44281 PALP CO

Faxes: + 57 1 286 7434 / 284 2186 / 337 1351

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President Pastrana

Attorney General

Dr. Alfonso Gómez Méndez,

Fiscal General de la Nación, Fiscalía General de la Nación,
 Diagonal 22B 5201, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Fiscal General, Fiscalía General, Bogotá, Colombia

Faxes: + 57 1 570 2022 (a recorded message will play before putting you through to a ringing tone for the fax machine)

Salutation: Estimado Dr./ Dear Dr. Gómez

Commander of the Army

General Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel, Comandante del Ejército Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado - Carrera 52, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Comandante del Ejercito, Bogota, Colombia

Telexes: 43401 COEJC

Salutation: Sr. Comandante/Dear Commander

Fax: + 57 1 315 1570

Commander of Army's 5th Brigade

Comandante de la V Brigada, General Alberto Bravo Silva
 Calle 14, Carrera 33, Bucaramanga, Colombia

Fax: 57 76 455051

Salutation: Sr General/ Dear General

COPIES TO: Alternative Legal Association, MINGA, AA 40303, Santafé de Bogotá
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 14 July 1999.