

UA 277/99

Fear for

**COLOMBIA Human Rights Defenders in Barrancabermeja
Particularly members of ASFADDES, CREDHOS and the Coordinadora Popular de
Barrancabermeja.**

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of human rights defenders in the city of Barrancabermeja, department of Santander. This follows recent death threats, harassment and surveillance of two human rights organisations that operate in the city.

On 19 October at 7:10am a director of the *Corporación Regional de Derechos Humanos* (CREDHOS), Regional Human Rights Corporation, Pablo Javier Arenales, received a threatening telephone call saying "*Hueles a podrido hijueputa*", (You smell rotten you son-of-a-bitch). He was the victim of a failed attempt on his life in March this year.

The Barrancabermeja branch of the *Asociación de Familiares Detenidos y Desaparecidos*, ASFADDES, Association of the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared, has also recently received numerous telephone death threats in which they have been told they are "*muy jóvenes para morir*" (too young to die). Their offices have reportedly been the object of persistent surveillance by armed men using both unmarked cars and cars believed to belong to the *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* (DAS), Civilian Intelligence Service.

On 5 October an article in the local press reported that the Commander of the National Police in Barrancabermeja, had threatened to take to court Francisco José Campo, a member of CREDHOS' executive committee, for statements made with regards to a massacre of 8 people in the city on 27 September 1999. Francisco José Campo and Ramón Rangel, a member of the Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja, the coordination Committee for the People of Barrancabermeja (an umbrella NGO) denounced the reported presence of police vehicles in the area at the time of the massacre.

The Commander of the National Police was also quoted on 3 October as saying "*Rechazamos las acusaciones viles y canallescas de (...) la guerrilla, de Credhos (...) en su afan de desinformar la opinion pública*" (We reject the vile and despicable accusations made by..the guerrilla, by Credhos..in their hurry to misinform public opinion). Amnesty International is concerned that this statement is a clear attempt to link CREDHOS to armed opposition groups.

This was followed by a break-in during the weekend of 16 to 18 October in which CREDHOS's computer records were stolen. The stolen information contains confidential documentation and statements referring to investigations of human rights violations in the city over the last five years.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the past defamatory statements made by security force officials against human rights workers have been followed by death threats and serious human rights violations. Both ASFADDES and CREDHOS have played a prominent role denouncing massacres in Barrancabermeja carried out by paramilitary groups operating in unison and with the support of the security forces (see Barrancabermeja: A City Under Siege AMR 23/36/99; UA 156/98 AMR 23/43/98 -follow-ups AMR 23/37/98, AMR 23/52/98, AMR 23/60/98, AMR 23/63/98; and UA 41/99 AMR 23/23/99).

Human rights organizations, particularly those seeking to uphold the legal rights of people accused of "subversion", are frequently labelled guerrilla collaborators or supporters by the security forces and their paramilitary allies. These organizations are thus presented as legitimate targets in the counter-insurgency war. This policy has led the security forces and their paramilitary allies to commit an increasing number of serious human rights violations against human rights defenders. Over 20 human rights defenders have been killed or "disappeared" in Colombia in the last two years. Some armed opposition groups have also refused to respect the legitimacy and independence of organisations belonging to civil society.

On 9 September 1999, Colombia's Human Rights Day, President Andrés Pastrana issued Presidential Directive No 07 concerning 'support, communication and cooperation of the Colombian State with human rights organizations'. The Directive orders all public officials to abstain from questioning the legitimacy of human rights organizations and from making false accusations which could compromise their security or reputation.

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

- expressing grave concern for human rights defenders in Barrancabermeja, particularly those working for ASFADDES, CREDHOS and the Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja;
- calling on the authorities to take immediate and effective steps, as deemed appropriate by those at risk to guarantee the safety of members of ASFADDES, CREDHOS and the Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja;
- calling for a full, prompt and impartial investigation into the death threats received by Pablo Javier Arenales and members of ASFADDES, urging that the results be made public and that those responsible be brought to justice;
- calling for a full prompt and impartial investigation into the break-in and theft of confidential information from the CREDHOS office in Barrancabermeja;
- expressing concern at the defamatory statements made in public by the Commander of the National Police in Barrancabermeja;
- calling for the Colombian government to take all necessary steps to ensure that all public officials adhere to Presidential Directive No 07.

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

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Néstor Humberto Martínez, Ministro del Interior
Ministerio del Interior, Carrera 8, No.8-09, Piso 2
Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Telegrams: Ministerio del Interior, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO

Fax: + 57 1 286 8025 / 281 5884 / 342 3201

Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister

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

Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO

Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874

Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister

Governor of Santander Department

Sr. Miguel de Jesús Arenas Prada, Gobernador del Departamento de Santander
Gobernación de Santander, Calle 37, No. 10-30, Bucaramanga, Colombia

Faxes: + 57 7 633 9889

Salutation: Sr. Gobernador/ Dear Governor

COPIES TO:

Association for Relatives of the "Disappeared"

ASFADDES

Carrera 4a No 18-50, Oficina 1706

Edificio Procoll Torre A

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 25 November 1999.