

COLOMBIA The civilian population of Filo del Gringo and El Tarra, Norte de Santander department.

An Amnesty International delegation that visited the department of Norte de Santander in October 1999 is concerned that a paramilitary attack against those living in the village of Filo del Gringo village and El Tarra town is imminent.

Residents of both places told the delegation that they had been repeatedly threatened by paramilitaries, whose presence in the region has greatly increased recently. Despite this, a military base in nearby Bellavista, which had been in operation for over 20 years, was recently dismantled. The delegation was able to confirm that the communities are currently without any form of protection by the security forces.

A joint commission of state officials and human rights non-governmental organizations that visited the region in July recommended that protection be given to both Filo del Gringo and El Tarra.

At that time, state and UN officials were informed by regional paramilitary commanders that plans existed for an attack on both places in the near future. According to statistics compiled by the *Defensoría del Pueblo*, Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, at least 168 civilians have been killed by paramilitaries and armed opposition groups operating in the area since the end of May.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the paramilitaries launched the offensive in the region on 29 May 1999 they have been responsible for numerous massacres and have created thousands of refugees, many of whom fled into Venezuela (EXTRA 80/99, AMR 53/06/99 and UA 125/99, AMR 23/44/99). On 17 July paramilitaries killed 14 people and abducted 30 others in the town of Tibú (UA 172/99, AMR 23/51/99). At the end of August a paramilitary force killed at least 30 civilians in the district of La Gabarra (UA 219/99, AMR 23/60/99).

On 30 August, on the grounds of failing to take action against the paramilitary groups, the government relieved three high ranking officials in the region of their posts: General Bravo Silva of the army's 5th Brigade, and regional police and *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* (DAS), Civilian Intelligence Service commanders. In the days following his removal General Bravo Silva criticized the government's action against the military, leading to his official dismissal for insubordination. Amnesty International welcomes the initiative taken by the government to remove security force personnel against whom there is reliable evidence of tolerating paramilitary groups.

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. 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 El Tarra and Filo del Gringo, Norte de Santander department;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to guarantee the safety of the inhabitants;
- welcoming steps taken by the government to remove security force commanders against whom there is reliable evidence of tolerating or supporting paramilitary groups *but* expressing concern that concrete measures to end paramilitary activity in the region have still not been introduced;
- expressing concern at the failure of the government and armed forces to take steps to protect the civilian population of El Tarra and Filo del Gringo, despite repeated warnings of an impending paramilitary attack in the area;
- urging that the authorities take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments and recommendations made by the UN and other intergovernmental organisations.

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

Norte de Santander Chief of Police

Señor Raúl Antonio Gordillo Nuñez

Comandante

Departamento de Policía

Cucúta, Norte de Santander, Colombia

Telegrams: Comandante, Departamento de Policía, Norte de Santander, Colombia.

Faxes: + 57 7 576 2744 (Say "Me da el tono de fax, por favor")

Salutation: Sr. Comandante / Dear Commander

Commander of the Armoured Vehicle Corps, Tibú

Coronel Victor Hugo Matamoros

Comandante del Grupo Mecanizado Masa del Ejército

Grupo Mecanizado Masa del Ejército

Tibú, Norte de Santander, Colombia

Telegrams: Comandante, Grupo Mecanizado, Tibú, Norte de Santander, Colombia.

Faxes: + 57 7 772 2931 (Say "Me da el tono de fax, por favor")

Salutation: Sr. Comandante / Dear Commander

Commander of the 5th Brigade

General Martín Orlando Carreño Sandoval

Comandante de la V Brigada

Calle 14, Carrera 33

Bucaramanga

Santander

Telegrams: Comandante, Quinta Brigada, Santander, Colombia.

Faxes: + 57 76 455051 / 76 351493

Salutation: Sr. Comandante / Dear Commander

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 8 December 1999.