

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 23/129/2002

UA 337/02

Fear for safety/Death threats

14 November 2002

COLOMBIA

Members of the "Joel Sierra" Regional Human Rights Committee, *Comité Regional de Derechos Humanos "Joel Sierra"*

Killed: José Rusbell Lara (m)

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of members of the *Comité Regional de Derechos Humanos "Joel Sierra"*, "Joel Sierra" Regional Human Rights Committee, following the killing of a committee member in the Tame Municipality, Arauca Department.

At around 10:45am on 8 November, José Rusbell Lara was reportedly shot dead by two gunmen, thought to be members of army-backed paramilitary forces operating in the area, who were travelling on a motorcycle in central Tame. According to local sources, he had previously received death threats from paramilitaries operating in the region. Though he was killed close to the local police station, Amnesty International has received no information to suggest that the authorities made any attempt to arrest the gunmen.

Army-backed paramilitaries have also repeatedly threatened other members of the "Joel Sierra" Human Rights Committee. The paramilitaries have been able to consolidate their presence in the Tame Municipality and other regions of the department, even though there are many government security forces in the area. Before the death of José Rusbell Lara, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had called on the government to take precautionary measures to protect him and other human rights defenders in the Arauca Department.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Human rights defenders and other popular activists 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. This increases Amnesty International's concerns for the safety of human rights defenders.

Many civilian sectors in the department of Arauca, including mayors, other public officials and health workers have also been threatened and killed by armed opposition forces belonging to the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), National Liberation Army. These groups have also launched indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks against military targets which have resulted in killings and wounding of civilians.

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.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of members of the "Joel Sierra" Regional

Human Rights Committee which have been heightened by the killing of José Rusbell Lara;

- urging that all measures, deemed appropriate by those under threat themselves, are taken to guarantee their safety;
- urging that a full and impartial investigation 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 the killing of José Rusbell Lara, that the results are made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- reminding the authorities of their obligations to human rights defenders; as laid out in the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Human Rights Defenders in the Americas resolution of the Organization of American States and in repeated recommendations made to them by the United Nations;
- urging a full and impartial investigation into the links between the security forces and paramilitary forces in Arauca, that the results are made public and that those members of the security forces responsible for operating in unison with paramilitary forces or supporting them are brought to justice;
- expressing concern at the continued large-scale presence of army-backed paramilitary forces in Arauca despite the heavy military presence in the department and urging immediate decisive action to confront and dismantle these groups in line with repeated UN recommendations and governmental commitments.

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
+ 57 1 342 0592/ 566 2071**

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

Governor of the Arauca Department

Gobernador del Departamento de Arauca
Gobernación de Arauca
Coronel (r) José Emiro Palencia Álvarez
Palacio de Gobierno Departamental
Arauca, COLOMBIA

Fax : + 57 7 88 57 116 (if someone answers say Ame da tono de fax por favor@)

Salutation: Dear governor / Estimado Gobernador

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

Telegrams: National Advocate, Bogota, Colombia

Fax: + 57 1 640 0491 / 346 1225

Salutation: Estimado Sr. Cifuentes Muñoz/Dear Mr. Cifuentes Muñoz

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 26 December 2002.