

URGENT ACTION

CIVILIAN POPULATION THREATENED IN COLOMBIA

Paramilitaries have threatened the civilian population, and killed a peasant farmer, in a south-western municipality of Colombia. They have blockaded one hamlet since 28 November: 60 people have managed to flee, but those who remain are in danger, as are other peasant farmers in the municipality.

On 28 November about 120 heavily armed paramilitaries, most of them in camouflage, blockaded the hamlet of Las Perlas, in Argelia Municipality, Cauca Department. Men known to be paramilitaries have been seen talking with soldiers, and patrolling with them in the town of Argelia; paramilitaries and soldiers have set up joint checkpoints on the access road to the town.

On 30 November some 60 people, including children, managed to flee Las Perlas, while most of the town's population are still blockaded by the paramilitaries, who have threatened to kill them, and have threatened the women with sexual assault. Those left behind were told, "if the guerrillas fight and one of us dies, you will also die." (si la guerrilla combate y muere uno de nosotros, ustedes también se mueren).

On 2 December, peasant farmer Milton Díaz Cabezas was killed by two paramilitaries after they took him out of his house in the nearby hamlet of El Porvenir: there had been combat between guerrillas and paramilitaries the previous night.

The paramilitaries have announced that they are going to control the region, saying, "our objective is to seize the area of El Plateado before the end of the year." (nuestro objetivo es tomarnos el Corregimiento de El Plateado antes de que termine el año). The paramilitaries have also threatened civilians elsewhere in Argelia, in the communities of las Cumbres, Cristales Altos, Cristales Bajos, Miro lindo, La Playa, La Primavera and Campo Alegre.

Despite the fact that the area is heavily militarized no apparent action has been taken to confront the paramilitaries.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Spanish or your own language:

- Expressing concern for the safety of the civilian population of Argelia Municipality, who are facing a paramilitary offensive;
- Demanding that the authorities take decisive action to guarantee the civilian population's right to life and right not to be drawn into the conflict in Argelia municipality;
- Demanding that the authorities order a full and impartial investigation into the threats and killings, and bring those responsible to justice;
- Urging the authorities to take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments and recommendations made by the UN and other intergovernmental organizations.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 24 JANUARY 2010 TO:

Señor Presidente Juan Manuel Santos
Presidente de la República,
Palacio de Nariño,
Carrera 8 No.7-26,
Bogotá, Colombia

Fax: +57 1 596 0631

**Salutation: Dear President Santos/
Excmo. Sr. Presidente**

Minister of Interior and Justice
Señor Germán Vargas Lleras
Ministerio Del Interior y De Justicia
Carrera 9a. No. 14-10, Bogotá,
Colombia

Fax: +57 1 599 8961

**Salutation: Dear Minister Vargas/
Estimado Sr. Ministro Vargas**

And copies to:

Human rights organization
Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz
Calle 61A, No. 17-26 (Chapinero),
Bogotá, Colombia

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The rural area of the municipality of Argelia has seen increased militarization over recent years to combat guerrilla forces active in the area. Paramilitaries, who have cooperated with the army, are also active in the area. Among the military units operating in the area are the José Hilario López Battalion, Boyacá Battalion, High Mountain Battalion No 4, Grupo Cabal Mechanized Battalion, Counter-guerrillas Battalions 37 and 57 of the XXIX Brigade based in Popayán and Mobile Brigades 14 and 19 attached to the III Division of the army.

Despite government claims that all paramilitaries demobilized in a government-sponsored programme that began in 2003, such groups continue to operate and commit serious human rights violations against human rights defenders and other civilians. This is sometimes in collusion with the security forces, or with their consent.

Many people have been killed or threatened by paramilitaries in Argelia in recent years. On 6 December paramilitaries seized the house of community leader Orlando Bolaños, who has been forced to flee to a city in Cauca, where the paramilitaries have continued to threaten to him. His house in the hamlet of Cristales Altos has been repeatedly seized by paramilitaries as a centre for operations.

Civilians who defend their right not to be drawn into Colombia's armed conflict and refuse to take sides with any of the parties to the conflict met with suspicion and hostility from the army, the paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. The right of the civilian population not to be drawn into conflict has been repeatedly violated: they have been forced to take sides, or killed when they refuse.

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