

TRADE UNIONISTS UNDER ATTACK IN COLOMBIA

Defending the rights of workers in the mining, oil, gas and energy sectors

Adán Alberto Pacheco Rodríguez, a member and former leader of the electricity workers' union SINTRAELECOL, was reportedly shot dead on 2 May 2005 by two gunmen while he was on the balcony of his home in Barranquilla.

Two days later a written death threat against trade unionists, including SINTRAELECOL members, from the paramilitary group Death to Trade Unionists (Muerte a Sindicalistas, MAS) was received in the offices of the health workers' union ANTHOC in Barranquilla.

An article in the magazine *Semana* published on 4 September 2006 reported that the Office of the Attorney General had found information on a computer in the possession of a commander of the Bloque Norte paramilitary group relating to the killing of around 60 people by the same group. One of the documents, dated 2 May 2005, refers to the killing of Adán Alberto Pacheco who is described as a member of the FARC.

The mining, oil, gas and energy sectors are among Colombia's most lucrative industries. The country's vast wealth in water resources has also provided significant hydroelectric energy capacity. Much of the electricity produced is exported to neighbouring countries, providing Colombia with an important source of income.

Colombia's wealth in water and mining, oil and gas, coupled with increased privatization of important parts of these industries, has attracted major transnational corporations to the country. Trade unionists in these sectors have faced repeated human rights violations, often because of their opposition to privatization, during labour disputes and when campaigning against the development of large-scale mining or energy projects which threaten the livelihoods of local communities.

Trade unionists are frequently labelled as subversive by the security forces and paramilitaries. Such criticisms are often followed by human rights violations which also frequently coincide with periods of labour unrest or negotiations over working conditions.

Who is responsible for these human rights violations?

Many of the human rights abuses committed against trade unionists cannot be attributed to any particular group. However, of those where there is clear evidence of responsibility, the security forces and army-backed paramilitary groups are responsible for the overwhelming majority. A number of cases have been attributed to guerrilla organizations.

Over the past four decades, Colombia has been riven by an armed conflict between the security forces and paramilitaries on the one side and on the other by guerrilla forces, the largest of which is the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC). Although there has been a decrease in certain types of violence associated with the armed conflict, the human rights situation in Colombia remains dire. All parties to the conflict continue to commit war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international law.

The conflict provides a useful cover for those seeking to expand and protect economic interests. Over 60 per cent of the more than 3 million internally displaced people in Colombia have been

forced from their homes and lands in areas of mineral, agricultural or other economic importance.

Although more than 30,000 paramilitaries have reportedly been "demobilized" in the last three years in a controversial government-sponsored demobilization process, there is strong evidence that paramilitary groups continue to operate and have been responsible for human rights violations including threats, killings, and enforced disappearances. Sometimes these crimes have been committed with the acquiescence of or in collusion with the security forces.

On 25 November 2006, gunmen travelling on two motorcycles opened fire on the bullet-proof car used by **Rodolfo Vecino Acevedo**, the leader of the oil workers' union USO. He was not in the car at the time and the three people who were in the car, one of whom was Rodolfo Vecino's wife, escaped unhurt. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights of the Organization of American States has called on the Colombian authorities to take measures to guarantee the safety of Rodolfo Vecino and his family.

In July 2005, Rodolfo Vecino received a death threat from the Urban Front (Frente Urbano) of the paramilitary umbrella group the AUC. In May 2006, according to media reports, an unidentified individual approached Rodolfo Vecino while he was attending a meeting in Barranquilla and told him that there was a plan, co-ordinated by paramilitaries, security forces and business interests, to kill him and two other USO members. On 27 November 2006, a member of the USO's Human Rights and Peace Commission, Fernando Ramírez, reportedly received a telephone death threat. In an e-mailed death threat sent to the USO on 28 November 2006 the Bloque Norte of the AUC reportedly claimed responsibility for the attempt on the life of Rodolfo Vecino and announced its intention to kill USO and student activists in the north of the country.

Members of SINTRAMIENERGETICA, the mining and energy workers' union, were at particular risk in 2006. On 25 March 2006, Harvey Jovanny Morales Guevara, a worker for Drummond Company and SINTRAMIENERGETICA activist, was killed, reportedly by unidentified gunmen, in the centre of Santa Marta, Atlántico Department.

On 29 April 2006, members of SINTRAMIENERGETICA were reportedly threatened during a trade union demonstration in the municipality of Paso, Cesar Department. According to reports, a local police commander accused the trade unionists of being guerrillas and a member of the police pointed his rifle at trade union leader Luis Antonio Garzón. The demonstration was taking place on the same day as a meeting between Drummond Company representatives and SINTRAMIENERGETICA leaders. At this meeting the trade union was seeking to negotiate improvements to labour and employment conditions for employees of the mining company.

Trade unionists in Colombia are at grave risk of human rights abuses. Successive Colombian governments have implemented a series of policies to improve the protection of trade unionists. However, this has not effectively guaranteed the safety of trade union activists and their families. The long-term security of trade unionists depends on decisive action by the Colombian authorities to end the impunity which protects the vast majority of those responsible for the human rights abuses against them.

ACT NOW

Please write to:

- ▶ **Presidente de la República de Colombia**, Dr. Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Bogotá, Colombia

Express concern at the human rights crisis faced by trade unionists in Colombia and urge him to ensure the Colombian authorities take decisive measures, in accordance with the wishes of those at risk, to guarantee their safety. Call on him to ensure that the recommendations of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights are fully implemented. Urge him to ensure that the death threats against and killings of members of trade unions representing workers in the mining, oil, gas and energy sectors are fully and impartially investigated, that the results are made public and that those responsible are brought to justice. Remind him that in June 2006 the Colombian government signed a Tripartite Agreement with trade unions and employers in which it committed itself to ensure an end to impunity for human rights abuses against trade unionists. Urge him to

ensure that the criminal special investigations unit of Colombia's Office of the Attorney General, set up as a result of this Agreement to investigate violations and abuses against trade unionists is adequately staffed and funded.

- ▶ **Your Minister of Foreign Affairs**, raising these points and asking how your government is going to call on the Colombian authorities to fulfil these recommendations. If your foreign ministry is in contact with guerrilla groups, ask officials to call on these groups to put an end to killings of trade unionists.
- ▶ **Your trade union**, urging it to raise these issues with the Colombian government and your own government.

Several sections of Amnesty International are undertaking other campaign work on the situation of trade unionists in Colombia. You may wish to contact the Amnesty International section in your country to check if it is participating in this campaign work and how you can get involved.