

# @Trade unionists in Colombia; A tenuous grip on life

Political violence is endemic in Colombia. The victims are drawn from many sectors of society, ranging from those whose misfortune it is simply to live in areas of civil conflict to those who are actively involved - for whatever reason - in their community. Trade unionists belong to the latter group. They are often and specifically targeted because their trade union activities are perceived as "subversive". According to the Colombian Trade Union Confederation, *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores*, 1,500 union members have been killed since 1986. In less than 8 years, 2% of the organised labour force in Colombia has been eliminated. In 1993 a total of 170 trade unionists were killed. In the first nine months of 1994, 27 trade unionists, including 12 leaders, were shot dead in the department of Antioquia alone, although not all of these were killed solely because of their union activities. One trade union leader recently commented,

"Furthermore it can be seen that to be a trade union leader or activist in Colombia is a dangerous activity, all the more so because in recent pronouncements made by the Procurator General in his second report on the human rights situation in Colombia it is claimed that trade unions form part of the 'enemy within' and that the state security bodies are trained to persecute them".

The situation in Colombia, including the killing and "disappearance" of trade unionists, has been the subject of a number of complaints to the International Labour Organisation's Committee on Freedom of Association and discussed at the last six sessions of the Committee on Application of Standards at the annual International Labour Conference.

## **Political killings in Colombia**

A long-running civil conflict between the armed forces and several guerrilla groups has been the context in which human rights have been systematically violated by security forces and their paramilitary allies, who are responsible for the greatest number of political killings in Colombia, according to statistics compiled by independent bodies. Guerrilla forces have also been responsible for international humanitarian law including arbitrary and deliberate killings.

Paramilitary forces became an integral part of the Colombian army's counter-insurgency strategy. Their emergence in rural areas in the early 1980s coincided with a sharp increase in political killings and "disappearances". Originally intended to provide auxiliary support for the army in its counter-insurgency operations, these paramilitary groups became powerful military structures in their own right. The support they provide to

the army is rarely by attacking guerrillas, instead they "fumigate" areas of tactical interest. This involves eradicating anyone perceived as sympathising with guerrillas.

Although in 1989 the then Colombian government suspended the legal base for the formation of paramilitary organisations and issued directives to the Colombian armed forces to combat and disband such groups, paramilitary forces have continued to kill and "disappear" with impunity in many areas of the country and continue to work with the support of the security forces.

Frequently those targeted by the security forces and their paramilitary allies have been non-combatant peasant farmers in conflict zones. But the victims of political killings and other forms of human rights violation also include trade union leaders, labour activists, organisers of peasant associations and indigenous leaders, members of opposition political groups and teachers. These people have often been labelled as subversive by the security forces and their paramilitary allies, accusations which have then frequently been followed by human rights violations. Journalists and others attempting to investigate human rights violations, including members of the judiciary and Public Ministry officials, have also been targeted and killed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies.

### **A new government, new promises**

The recently elected government of President Ernesto Samper Pizano, which came to power in August 1994, has promised to improve the human rights situation in Colombia and made a commitment to disband paramilitary groups. On 9 September 1994, President Samper gave a speech as part of National Human Rights Day in which he launched his government's human rights program. The program encapsulated many of the commitments made by the president in his inauguration speech and in the course of the presidential campaign, and it included a reaffirmation of the government's commitment to end the virtually total impunity enjoyed by members of the security forces responsible for human rights violations, and to eradicate paramilitary forces.

### **Resurgence of paramilitary activity**

However, despite these promises, the government has yet to take definitive action against paramilitary groups. Moreover, paramilitary activity has actually seen a resurgence in the first few months of the new administration, despite the government's promises concerning human rights or perhaps even in defiance of them. The resurgence of paramilitary activity was marked to some extent by several killings which took place before the government of President Samper came to office.

On 30 July 1994 a paramilitary group calling itself *Colombia sin Guerrilla* (COLSINGUE) - Colombia without Guerrillas - in a communique to the Medellín media

claimed responsibility for the killing of Jairo de León Agudelo, Guillermo Marín and Luis Efrén Correa.<sup>1</sup> In the communique the paramilitary group declared war against - "*Los miembros, políticos y combatientes, de grupos subversivos del país*" - "the members, politicians and combatants of subversive groups in the country", and went on to declare that just as guerrilla forces did not respect non-combatant opponents, "*tampoco nosotros respetaremos sus cuadros políticos y sindicales*" - "neither will we respect their political and trade union cadres".

Despite the present government's pledge to eradicate paramilitary groups and the apparent upsurge in paramilitary activity, it has taken little if any effective action to eradicate these groups. Not only has the government failed to date to implement orders for the arrest of Fidel Castaño and other recognized paramilitary leaders responsible for human rights violations, a move which would be an indication of commitment to take firm action, but Amnesty International is concerned that recent policy initiatives actually threaten to secure the continuation of paramilitary activity, albeit under a different guise.

In December 1994 the government launched a new Integrated Rural Security Plan which envisages the creation of *Asociaciones Comunitarias de Vigilancia Rural* (CONVIVIR) - Community Rural Surveillance Associations. These "Associations" are designed to have a "defensive rather than an offensive role" and will principally assist the armed and security forces in intelligence gathering. However, Amnesty International is concerned that the plan provides that the new model of civilian vigilante groups may still "in exceptional circumstances", be issued with weapons by the army. In view of the army's acknowledged role in creating, training and equipping the paramilitary organizations responsible for widespread human rights violations, the lack of civilian accountability for issuing the weapons is a serious omission. The fear is that the plan will permit the continuation of the army's counter-insurgency strategy, a fundamental part of which involves the development of paramilitary groups, albeit with slightly modified paramilitary structures and paramilitary groups will continue to commit extrajudicial executions, "disappearances" and other forms of human rights violation.

Amnesty International is concerned that until effective government action is taken to eradicate paramilitary forces, and until measures are taken to ensure that members of the security forces and their paramilitary force allies responsible for human rights violations against trade unionists and many others are brought to justice, trade unionists will continue to be a major target of human rights violations.

Guillermo Marín was killed on 18 July 1994. He was the leader of *Federación Unitaria de Trabajadores de Antioquia (FUTRAN)*. Two hours before his death he had stated in a speech to union leaders:

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<sup>1</sup> See also *Trade union appeal cases* December 1994 (AI Index: ACT 73/05/94)

"He puesto en conocimiento de la Procuraduría y la Fiscalía que vengo siendo amenazado de muerte, al igual que dos compañeros más de nuestro Comité Ejecutivo; recomendamos a todos los asistentes andar a la salida de éste seminario en grupos mayores de cinco dirigentes, para que nos cuidemos unos con otros".

"I have denounced to the Procurator-General's Office and the Attorney-General's Office that I and two other members of our Executive Committee have been receiving death threats; we suggest that all those present on leaving this seminar should walk out in groups of five so that we protect each other".

At 11.30 am Guillermo Marín in the company of other union workers, left the headquarters of the *Sindicato de Trabajadores del Instituto de Seguros Sociales* - Institute of Social Security Union Workers, where he had been speaking. The group was intimidated and then a gunman shot Guillermo Marín from behind, he was killed by four bullets to the head. The assassin left a leaflet on Guillermo Marín's body:

*Muerte a dirigentes y activistas de masa, dirigentes políticos de izquierda, y dirigentes sindicales. COLSINGUE (Colombia sin Guerrilla)".*

Death to popular leaders and activists, political leaders of the left, and union leaders. COLSINGUE (Colombia without Guerrillas)".

For five months since his death, Guillermo Marín's family has continued to face death threats and been forced to move home on several occasions.

In September, five heavily armed men forced their way into the office of the *Federación de Trabajadores de Antioquia* (FUTRAN), United Workers' Federation of Antioquia, and opened fire killing **Hugo Zapata**, the unions disputes secretary, and seriously injuring **Carlos Posada**, the union's human rights secretary. The killings followed a few hours after police interviewed the president of FUTRAN, Belisario Restrepo, about the circumstances surrounding the killing of Guillermo Marín.

On 10 October 1994, Hernando Cuadros, a trade union leader of the Tibú branch of the oilworker's union, *Unión Sindical de Obreros*, USO, was abducted from his home and killed. At the same time, unsuccessful attempts were made to abduct other members of the same union. It is believed that paramilitary groups operating in collaboration with the armed forces in the region carried out the killing.

On 17 November 1994, Rodrigo Flórez, was killed by gunmen in a moving vehicle when they opened fire on the headquarters of the *Unión Patriótica* (UP), Patriotic Union and the *Partido Comunista Colombiano* (PCC), Colombian Communist Party. The

building had been under guard until 30 October 1994 when the guard was withdrawn without explanation. Rodrigo Flórez was a construction worker, trade unionist and political activist.

Although Rodrigo Flórez was not singled out as a target for his trade union activity, given that his death took place in an indiscriminate attack on the UP/PCC headquarters, the concern is that his killing follows the communique issued by COLSINGUE to the Medellín media (see above) and therefore was part of the paramilitary groups threat to eliminate opposition political party members, trade unionists and political activists.

The concern is that despite the Samper Government's pledge to eradicate paramilitary forces, this pledge has still to be translated into effective action. Until this is done, trade unionists as well as opposition political leaders, popular and community activists will continue to be under threat.

**Amnesty International is calling on the Colombian government to:**

- Investigate immediately and thoroughly all cases of suspected political killings, attempted political killings, threats or harassment by the security forces or paramilitary groups, make the results public and bring those found responsible to justice;
- Take all possible measures to protect the lives of trade union leaders in Colombia, particularly taking into account the number of recent killings of trade unionists;
- Take immediate steps to eradicate paramilitary forces in accordance with the present government's human rights program and undertake full and impartial investigations into links between paramilitary groups and security forces, the results of which should be made public;
- Undertake that links between members of the security forces and paramilitary groups are fully and impartially investigated and ensure that members of the armed forces responsible for training, setting up and participating in the actions of paramilitary groups as well as paramilitary group members themselves are brought to justice.

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