

£COLOMBIA @Human rights defenders under attack

Human rights organizations working for the defence and promotion of fundamental human rights in Colombia are facing severe and increasing difficulties. People working to guarantee recognition and respect for human rights in Colombia have faced harassment and threats and, increasingly, extrajudicial execution. Amnesty International is gravely concerned that in recent months the attempts to prevent human rights defenders from carrying out their legitimate activities have increased significantly and urges the Colombian government to take urgent and decisive steps to not only protect human rights defenders but to ensure full and impartial investigations in order to bring to justice those responsible for the recent attacks. The important role which those working in the field of human rights can play in ensuring development of a just society is well recognized by the international community. The role of human rights organizations becomes even more vital in situations such as that faced by Colombian society in which widespread human rights violations occur in a climate of impunity, indifference and a breakdown in the rule of law.

DR EDUARDO UMAÑA MENDOZA

During the last week of September 1991 **Dr. Umaña Mendoza** received a number of anonymous phone calls warning him to stop his human rights activities or he would be killed.

On 1 October, the number of threats against Dr. Umaña increased dramatically and were made both to his office and private phones. Although no specific motive was given by those issuing the threats, it is believed they may have been connected to Dr. Umaña's role in representing the surviving members of a peasant family whose relatives were allegedly killed by members of the Colombian army in Fusagasugá, Cundinamarca department, on 18 August 1991. Although the Colombian authorities, on learning of the threats against Dr. Umaña, took steps to safeguard his immediate physical integrity, the threats against him continue.

POLITICAL PRISONERS SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE, CALI

Two human rights lawyers, **William Peña Barrios** and **Ramiro Antury**, received death threats at the end of last year. On 6 December 1991 an envelope arrived at the offices of the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee, Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, (CSPP), in Cali, Valle del Cauca department, addressed to William Peña and Ramiro Antury and contained an invitation to their own funeral mass, (sufragio), signed by a paramilitary group called MAC - Muerte a Comunistas, Death to Communists. Both men

had received other death threats, apparently as a result of their human rights work. William Peña had reportedly just presented his final statement in a case of "disappearance"/extrajudicial execution where members of the armed forces had reportedly admitted responsibility for the killing of a union treasurer, Jorge Eliécer Agudelo in 1989.

REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE, BARRANCABERMEJA

Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, President of the Regional Human Rights Committee, Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, CREDHOS, based in Barrancabermeja, department of Santander, spent several months outside Colombia following serious threats against his life by paramilitary groups. On his return to Barrancabermeja at the beginning of 1992 the threats and harassment against him began again. The harassment included being permanently followed, reportedly by people on motorcycles who, according to investigations carried out by CREDHOS, belonged to state security agencies.

Only days after the return of Dr. Gómez to Barrancabermeja in January 1992, CREDHOS' secretary, **Blanca Valero de Durán**, died just outside the CREDHOS offices in Barrancabermeja as a result of shots fired by armed men in civilian clothes. According to reports, three policemen who witnessed the attack did not respond to the victim's cries for help or attempt to capture the assailants, who remain at liberty. Following this attack, several of the Committee's staff left Barrancabermeja due to the serious risks they faced of an attempt being made on their lives.

Following statements by local military commanders in February 1992 linking CREDHOS to guerrilla organizations, threats from paramilitary forces increased. In June three CREDHOS members, including Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, escaped injury when their cars came under sustained fire from several heavily armed men. Although the Colombian government has condemned the attacks on CREDHOS and has promised full investigations, those responsible have not yet been identified and brought to justice.

Later in June another member of CREDHOS was killed: **Julio César Berrío** had worked for CREDHOS for two years as a security guard protecting the Committee's offices. He had also recently been involved in investigating a killing in Barrancabermeja attributed to the security forces. At 5pm on 28 June 1992 Julio César Berrío was shot dead by two unidentified gunmen in an ice-cream parlour in Barrancabermeja. His wife witnessed the shooting. Julio César Berrío was the third member of CREDHOS to be killed in the last 16 months: in March 1991 **Humberto Hernández** was shot dead in Barrancabermeja by men in plain clothes.

The work of CREDHOS in defence of human rights in the strife-torn region of Magdalena Medio has achieved international recognition. In 1991 CREDHOS received the "Lettelier-Moffit" award from the Institute of Political Studies in Washington, United States. Amongst other activities, the Committee regularly denounces human rights violations committed by the regular armed forces and by paramilitary groups operating under their command or with their support. CREDHOS have also denounced abuses committed by guerrilla organizations in the region. During the first few months of 1992 CREDHOS repeatedly expressed its concern about the escalation of abuses in the Magdalena Medio region, including enforced recruitment, torture, extrajudicial execution and "disappearance" committed by the Colombian army, police force and paramilitary organizations working with them against the civilian population.

On 2 July 1992 Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo received information warning him that personnel from the intelligence unit of the National Police (F-2) had arrived in the town of Barrancabermeja with the intention of killing him. Although it is not possible for Amnesty International to verify the information received by Dr. Gómez Lizarazo, the organization believes that in view of the recent attacks against CREDHOS members, the Colombian authorities should take urgent measures to protect the life of Dr. Gómez Lizarazo.

OCAÑA, NORTE DE SANTANDER

Edwar Alvarez Vacca, member of the Coordinating Team for the Defence of Human Rights, Equipo Coordinadora para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, in Ocaña, department of Norte de Santander, has also been the victim of threats and harassment. In August 1991 the Coordinating Team organized a regional human rights forum in Ocaña. Shortly after the forum, the Coordinating Team received an anonymous threat accusing them of being a front for the guerrilla group National Liberation Army, Ejército de Liberación Nacional, (ELN), and saying that they would pay heavily if they did not stop using the Coordinating Team for this purpose. On 1 February 1992 Edwar Alvarez Vacca was detained by a military patrol. At the military base in Esmeralda he was searched and interrogated by an army officer, who reportedly said to him that the Coordinating Team was a front for left-wing political groups and demanded the names of other members of the Coordinating Team. In March Edwar Alvarez was released and charges against him were dropped.

LEGAL ADVISER FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Oscar Elías López, a lawyer, was killed in the town of Santander de Quilichao, department of Cauca, by heavily armed men on the evening of 29 May, in circumstances suggesting he may have been the victim of extrajudicial execution. Oscar Elías López worked as the legal adviser for the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca, (CRIC). He had reportedly received numerous death threats prior to his killing, as have other CRIC lawyers. Oscar Elías López had been acting as adviser to the indigenous communities affected by a massacre on 16 December 1991, in which at least 20 Páez indigenous community members died. The Indians, who had been occupying a property called "El Nilo" near the town of Caloto, Cauca, were killed by some 60 armed and hooded gunmen who burst into a building where the Indians were holding a meeting. On 8 January 1992 three men who were involved in an independent investigation of the massacre were killed or "disappeared". Lawyers **Carlos Edgar Torres** and **Rodolfo Alvarez** were shot dead at their homes in Cali, department of Valle, while anthropologist **Etnio Vidardo** "disappeared" from Cali that same night. The CRIC reported that five of its leaders had been receiving death threats since the massacre occurred.

CARMEN DE CHUCURI, DEPARTMENT OF SANTANDER

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed its concern to the Colombian government about human rights violations committed by paramilitary forces operating with the support or acquiescence of the Colombian armed forces. Although the Colombian government suspended the legal basis by which the armed forces had created and equipped civilian auxiliary forces, paramilitary groups continue to operate freely and with impunity in several areas of the country. Numerous abuses, including forced recruitment, torture, "disappearance" and extrajudicial executions against the civilian population have been attributed to groups operating in the vicinity of Carmen and San Vicente de Chucuri in the strife torn Magdalena Medio region of Colombia. Guerrilla forces operating in these areas have also been responsible for abuses against the civilian population and have frequently disregarded the principles of international humanitarian law. Recently AI has received a number of reports of civilians who have sustained severe injuries or have been killed by land-mines placed by the Ejército de Liberación Nacional in rural areas between the municipalities of San Vicente and Carmen de Chucuri.

Human rights organizations attempting to record abuses against the civilian population in this area have come under increasing attack by both paramilitary groups and the armed forces. In August 1990 the Catholic church's **Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz**, Justice and Peace Intercongregational Commission, produced a report documenting numerous violations of fundamental human rights against non-combatant civilians in the area by paramilitary forces and providing evidence of army support for the activities of such groups. On the basis of information contained in the report, a civilian court judge opened an

investigation. After receiving testimonies from victims of human rights violations by paramilitary forces, the judge issued arrest warrants against 26 people, including the mayor of Carmen de Chucuri, for their alleged involvement in paramilitary activities. Attempts by the judicial officials to enforce the arrest warrants in March 1992 were, however, unsuccessful. In recent weeks a series of reports has appeared in the national press, television and radio concerning the situation in Carmen and San Vicente de Chucuri. The reports have quoted military commanders categorically denying the existence of paramilitary forces in the region and accusing human rights defenders and organizations who denounce abuses by paramilitary forces of acting in the interests of guerrilla organizations. Several leading human rights defenders and organizations are mentioned by name and some are directly accused of membership of guerrilla organizations.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned that media reports accusing independent human rights organizations of links with guerrilla organizations, and the identification of human rights defenders in those reports, pose a serious threat to their physical safety and could encourage attacks against them.