

**COLOMBIA Human rights defenders in Meta Department, central Colombia**

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There are grave fears for the safety of human rights defenders in Meta Department after a government official warned that paramilitary groups, which are intensifying their activities in the region, specifically aim to exterminate everyone working in defence of human rights there.

Intelligence gathered by the *Cuerpo Técnico de Investigaciones de la Fiscalía*, Technical Investigations Unit of the Attorney General's Office, led the Unit's regional director to write to the *Personero*, People's Ombudsman, for Villavicencio, capital of Meta Department. The letter stated that paramilitary groups under the leadership of the Castaño brothers were establishing themselves in the region and that one of their operational aims would be to "*reiniciar una labor de exterminio en contra de miembros y organismos dedicados a la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en el Meta*", restart an extermination campaign against members and organizations dedicated to the defence of human rights in Meta.

Reports suggest that despite this official recognition of danger and the persistent rumours of an impending paramilitary incursion into Villavicencio, no effective steps have been taken by the authorities to protect the human rights community in Meta.

Increasing political violence in Meta has caused many people to seek refuge in Villavicencio. The security forces and their paramilitary allies often accuse internally displaced people and human rights workers who seek to defend them of being guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers. In the past those facing such accusations have often been subject to death threats, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution.

The paramilitary groups led by the Castaño brothers are reported to have been responsible for attacks on at least two towns in the department of Meta, Mapiripan (see UA 228/97, AMR 23/50/97, 22 July 1997) and Puerto Alvira (see UA 144/98, AMR 23/27/98, 6 May 1998) in which at least 50 people were killed. Both attacks reportedly took place with the collaboration or acquiescence of the armed forces.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Peasant communities in disputed zones in Colombia's long running civil conflict have frequently suffered attacks. Neither the left wing armed opposition groups nor the armed forces and their paramilitary allies recognize the civilian population's neutrality in the conflict. Those who seek to defend human rights in this climate often become victims of human rights violations themselves. On 13 October 1996, Josué Giraldo, president of the *Comité Cívico por los Derechos Humanos de Meta*, Meta Civic Human Rights Committee, was killed by gunmen in Villavicencio. His death forced the Committee to suspend its activities and for many of its members to leave the area.

Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. Over the past five years several thousand civilians have been killed by paramilitary groups throughout the country. The Colombian government suspended the constitutional legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the armed forces to combat and disband such groups in 1989, yet they continue to work with the support of the security forces in many areas of the country.

President Ernesto Samper Pizano has repeatedly promised to improve the human rights situation and to dismantle paramilitary forces, but no steps have been taken to control their actions and to hold members accountable for serious and widespread human rights violations. The Attorney General recently stated that over 200 outstanding arrest warrants issued against alleged paramilitary members have still not been acted upon by the security forces.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:**

- expressing concern for the safety of the human rights defenders working in Meta Department in light of the *Fiscalía's* warning of an impending paramilitary campaign against them;
- urging the authorities to act on the *Fiscalía's* warning and take all appropriate measures to guarantee the safety of all human rights defenders in Meta;
- calling on the authorities to take effective measures to guarantee the physical integrity of the displaced communities living in Villavicencio;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the area and urging that those found responsible for supporting and participating in such groups be brought to justice;
- urging that the authorities take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments;
- urging the authorities to act on the outstanding arrest warrants for the Castaño brothers and other leaders of paramilitary organizations.

**APPEALS TO:**

President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente Ernesto Samper Pizano, Presidente de la República  
Palacio de Nariño, carrera 8 No. 7-26, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegrams: President Samper Pizano, Bogotá, Colombia**

**Telexes: 44281 PALP CO**

**Fax: + 57 1 284 2186/289 3377/286 7434**

**Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/Dear President Samper**

Attorney General

Dr Alfonso Gómez Méndez,

Fiscal General de la Nación, Fiscalía General de la Nación,  
Diagonal 22B 5201, Apartado Aéreo 29855, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegrams: Fiscal General, Fiscalía General, Bogotá, Colombia**

**Faxes: + 571 570 2000 (when ansaphone picks up dial 2017 for fax)**

**Salutation: Estimado Dr./Dear Dr.**

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Carlos Holmes Trujillo García, Ministro del Interior, Ministerio del Interior,  
Carrera 8, No.8-09, Piso 2, Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

**Telegrams: Ministro del Interior, Bogota, Colombia**

**Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO**

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

**Fax: + 57 1 281 5884/286 6524/286 0053/284 0214/286 0405**

**COPIES TO:**

Human Rights Organization

Grupo de Apoyo a Organizaciones de Desplazados (GAD)  
Calle 61# 13-54, piso 4, Bogotá, Colombia

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 1 August 1998.