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Colombia: Trade unionists and human rights defenders under attack

The recent detention of around 42 social activists and human rights defenders in Saravena, department of Arauca, 28 of whom remain under arrest, appears to be part of an on-going coordinated campaign to undermine the work of trade unionists and human rights activists and expose these sectors to increased attack from army-backed paramilitaries, Amnesty International said today.

The arrests came only days after President Álvaro Uribe criticized several military commanders for a lack of operational results, apparently including commanders in the department of Arauca.

"Trade unionists and other human rights defenders in the department of Arauca are facing a coordinated military-paramilitary strategy to label them and their organizations as subversive, thereby exposing them to arbitrary judicial proceedings and risk of violent attack by paramilitary groups," Amnesty International warned.

Amongst those detained in the joint operation undertaken by members of the XVIII Brigade and agents of the Office of the Attorney General on 21 August 2003, were José Murillo Tobo, president of the *Comité Regional de Derechos Humanos "Joel Sierra"*, "Joel Sierra" Regional Human Rights Committee, and Alonso Campiño Bedoya, leader of the regional branch of the CUT Trade Union Congress and member of the Regional Human Rights Committee.

The houses of Samuel Morales, president of the regional CUT, Alberto Paez, another trade union leader, and Ismael Pabón Mora, a leader of the Regional Human Rights Committee were searched during the raids. Arrest warrants against these three people were not carried out because they were not at home at the time of the raids.

The arrest of José Murillo and Alonso Campiño come after the Regional Human Rights Committee had denounced the presence of paramilitary groups operating in collusion with the security forces in Saravena. The arrests also follow a spate of accusations against the Committee made by the security forces in recent months that they were subversive collaborators.

Amnesty International has recently denounced human rights violations committed by paramilitary forces operating in Arauca in collusion with the XVIII Brigade. The Regional Human Rights Committee is one of the regional organizations which has denounced these violations at the international level.

Amnesty International has documented cases in which the security forces operating jointly

with the Office of the Attorney General have arrested human rights defenders and other social activists, not on the basis of independent and impartial judicial investigations but on the basis of unfounded military accusations. According to information received, two hooded informers participated in the arrests raising concerns that evidence is based on military intelligence and information provided by paid informers.

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