

UA 219/99

Fear for

COLOMBIA **Fear for safety: The civilian population of La Gabarra and Monseñor José de Jesús Quintero Díaz, Bishop of the Diocese of Tibú. Killed: At least 30 residents of La Gabarra.**

There is serious concern for the safety of the civilian population in La Gabarra district in the municipality of Tibú, Norte de Santander department. This follows a sustained paramilitary incursion into the area on the weekend of 20 and 21 August 1999, in which at least 30 residents were killed.

The attack began on the evening of 20 August when a heavily armed force entered the hamlet of Caño Lapa. The gunmen stated that they were members of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), United Self Defence Forces of Colombia. Using a list, they reportedly rounded up and shot and killed at least six people whom they accused of being guerilla sympathizers.

The paramilitaries continued their incursion on 21 August in the urban centre of La Gabarra, once again using a list to identify and kill those whom they considered to be guerilla collaborators.

Despite repeated warnings, and a heavy presence of the Colombian armed forces in the area, there was no attempt to prevent the paramilitary force from carrying out these attacks, or to pursue the assailants. The local *Defensor del Pueblo*, People's Ombudsman, said that the security forces "no han hecho nada" (did nothing to intervene).

On 15 August 1999 forces believed to belong to the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL), Popular Liberation Army, kidnapped the Bishop of Tibú, Monseñor José de Jesús Quintero Díaz. Amnesty International has called for his immediate release (See NS 157/99, AMR 23/59/99) and continues to be concerned for his well being. This kidnapping has contributed to a climate of civilian insecurity in the region.

On 30 May this year the national paramilitary leader, Carlos Castaño, stated that he would control the district "no matter how many people have to be killed" (See UA 125/99, AMR 23/44/99). The municipality of Tibú has long been a region occupied by the two principal armed opposition groups, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), National Liberation Army and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, as well as the smaller EPL. The paramilitary offensive has created thousands of refugees (See Extra 80/99, AMR 53/06/99), many of whom have fled across the border into Venezuela.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Peasant communities in disputed zones in Colombia's long-running civil conflict have frequently suffered human rights violations. Neither the armed forces and their paramilitary allies nor the left-wing armed opposition groups recognize the civilian population's neutrality in the conflict.

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.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of the civilian population of La Gabarra, Norte de Santander department;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to guarantee the safety of the inhabitants;
- expressing concern for the safety of Monseñor José de Jesús Quintero Díaz, Bishop of the Diocese of Tibú, who was abducted by an armed opposition group, and calling for his immediate release;
- calling for full, prompt and impartial investigations into the reported killings and abductions carried out in La Gabarra by a paramilitary force on 20 and 21 August 1999;
- urging that the results of the investigations be made public and that the perpetrators be brought to justice;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in Tibú and urging that those found responsible for supporting and participating in such groups be brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with stated government commitments.

APPEALS TO:

President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: President Pastrana, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 44281 PALP CO
Faxes: + 57 1 284 2186 / 337 1351
Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President Pastrana

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Néstor Humberto Martínez, Ministro del Interior
 Ministerio del Interior, Carrera 8, No. 8-09, Piso 2
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Ministerio del Interior, Bogotá, Colombia
Faxes: + 57 1 286 8025 / 281 5884
Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

Commander of the Army

General Jorge Enrique Mora Rangel
 Comandante del Ejército Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado - Carrera 52, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Telegrams: Comandante del Ejército, Bogotá, Colombia
Telexes: 43401 COEJC
Salutation: Sr. Comandante/Dear Commander
Fax: + 57 1 315 1570

COPIES TO: Alternative Legal Association
 MINGA, AA 40303, Santafé de 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