

PUBLIC

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Fear for Safety

13 September 2000

COLOMBIA

Civilian inhabitants of El Tarra and Filo del Gringo

Paramilitaries backed by the army are grouping near the communities of El Tarra and Filo del Gringo in the north-eastern department of Norte de Santander, after a recent army withdrawal from the area. Amnesty International fears an imminent paramilitary attack and is concerned for the safety of civilians in the region.

Paramilitary forces are reportedly advancing on Filo del Gringo, grouping in San Isidro Altos de Orú less than four kilometres away. The nearby municipal capital, El Tarra, is also under threat. Paramilitaries have attacked these and neighbouring communities several times in the past year, despite a strong military presence in the area, and even though the Colombian authorities were warned of imminent paramilitary attacks. The inhabitants have also received death threats from the paramilitaries.

Soldiers from Battalion No.50 of the V Brigade, who had been stationed in El Tarra, reportedly withdrew on 30 August 2000. In the past, paramilitary attacks have often followed the withdrawal of security forces from an area.

(For further information on paramilitary attacks in the region, see UA 16/00, AMR 23/02/00, 24 January 2000 and follow-up AMR 23/10/00, 8 March 2000; UA 80/00, AMR 23/17/00, 7 April 2000).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There has been many reports of army-backed paramilitary activity in Norte de Santander since 29 May 1999, when 400 paramilitaries began a series of massacres and attacks on civilian communities. Since December 1999, paramilitaries have threatened to kill people in El Tarra they accuse of being guerrilla collaborators. On 3 March 2000, paramilitaries burned the village of Filo del Gringo to the ground, despite state authorities and human rights organizations having warned the army of a possible imminent attack.

On 30 August 1999, the government relieved three high ranking army officers in the region for failing to take action against paramilitary groups. One of them, General Bravo Silva of the V Brigade, criticized the government's action against the military, and was dismissed for insubordination. Amnesty International welcomes this action, but remains concerned that the government is failing to act on its commitment to dismantle paramilitary groups, and that no decisive action has been taken against paramilitaries operating in Norte de Santander.

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

Similarly, guerrilla forces and armed opposition groups have committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, for example executing those they accuse of being security force or paramilitary collaborators and supporters.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of civilian inhabitants of El Tarra and Filo del Gringo as paramilitary forces gather in the region;
- urging the authorities to take immediate and effective measures to guarantee their safety;

- calling for a full and impartial investigation into links between the security forces and paramilitary groups operating in the department of Norte de Santander, urging that the results are made public, and that those responsible for supporting and participating in such groups are brought to justice;
 - urging the authorities to take immediate and decisive action to combat and dismantle paramilitary groups, in line with repeated government commitments and United Nations recommendations.

APPEALS TO:President of the Republic

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana Arango

Presidente de la República

Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No.7-26, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

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Salutation: Dear President / Excmo. Sr PresidenteVice-President of the Republic

Señor Vicepresidente Gustavo Bell Lemus

Alto Consejero Presidencial para asuntos de Derechos Humanos y lucha Contra la Corrupción

Cra. 8 #7-26, Palacio de Nariño, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Fax: + 57 1 337 1351**Salutation: Dear Vice-President / Excmo. Sr Vicepresidente**Minister of Foreign Relations

Dr. Guillermo Fernández de Soto, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Palacio San Carlos

Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Telegrams: Ministra Relaciones Exteriores Fernández de Soto, Bogotá, Colombia**Telexes: 45209 MRRE CO****Fax: + 57 1 2825802****Salutation: Sr. Mininstro / Dear Minister**Commander of the 5th Brigade

General Martín Orlando Carreño Sandoval

Comandante de la V Brigada

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Telegrams: Comandante, Quinta Brigada, Santander, Colombia.**Fax: + 57 7 645 5051/635 1493****Salutation: Sr. Comandante/Dear Commander****COPIES TO:**Alternative Legal Association

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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 24 October 2000.