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Colombia: Indigenous leader killed amid ongoing fighting in Cauca

The Colombian authorities must do more to protect civilians increasingly caught up in the ongoing armed conflict in Colombia, Amnesty International said today after an Indigenous leader was killed in Cauca, south-western Colombia, at the weekend.

Lisandro Tenorio, a traditional healer and spiritual leader for the Nasa Indigenous People, was shot dead by gunmen believed to be from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), outside his home in the López Adentro reservation (resguardo) in Cauca's Caloto municipality on Sunday afternoon.

The killing follows weeks of heavy fighting in several nearby communities between Colombian security forces and the FARC, which has resulted in the death of several civilians, with many more injured and thousands forcibly displaced.

Several Indigenous leaders, including Feliciano Valencia and Luis Acosta, have also been receiving death threats from paramilitaries in recent weeks after a coalition of Indigenous leaders called for an end to the hostilities and the withdrawal of government troops and FARC fighters from Indigenous territory. According to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) 54 Indigenous people were killed between January and July 2012, the Nasa being among those most affected.

"The recent killing of a Nasa Indigenous leader is another example of how civilians living on the front line continue to bear the brunt of the fighting in Cauca," said Susan Lee, Americas Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"The authorities must launch a full, independent and impartial investigation into his and other killings and the recent string of death threats against community leaders and activists, and bring those responsible to justice. They must also live up to their obligation under international humanitarian law to protect civilians at risk because of the armed conflict."

After the Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca (ACIN) called for an end to fighting last month, Colombia's Defence Minister claimed the FARC had infiltrated the Indigenous movement. Along with local human rights organizations and trade unions, ACIN was accused of being "defenders of the guerrillas".

Amnesty International believes such claims have exposed Indigenous communities and the wider civilian population living in the area to further attacks amid an already tense environment.

On 10 August, the Afro-descendant community of La Toma in the region's Suárez municipality came under attack – members of the FARC blew up a communications tower after military aircraft strafed a nearby area with machine-gun fire. FARC fighters allowed one of the community's leaders – who worked in the tower they targeted – to escape with his life, but the community was deeply shaken by the events.

Both sides in Colombia's long-running armed conflict have repeatedly been responsible for serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

Human rights defenders, trade unionists, and Indigenous, peasant farmer and Afro-descendant communities are frequently the victims of threats and attacks by the security forces and paramilitaries who often collude with them, as well as by guerrilla groups.

"Under international humanitarian law, all warring parties must respect the right of civilians not to be drawn into the conflict or targeted with threats or violence," said Susan Lee.