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Colombia: Third mass killing against Awá Indigenous Peoples in 2009

The killing of 12 Indigenous Peoples in Colombia, including four children, is a consequence of the failure of the authorities to heed warnings that unless measures were taken to protect the community, more attacks would take place, said Amnesty International today.

“Yesterday, the Awá Indigenous Peoples were victims of the third mass killing in less than one year,” said Susan Lee, Americas Programme Director. “How many more have to die before the government acts to protect these communities?.”

On 26 August, unidentified gunmen entered the Indigenous reservation of Gran Rosario in the south-western department of Nariño and killed 12 people thought to be members of the same family, including four children.

Amongst the Indigenous Peoples killed was Tulia García, who had received a series of death threats after the killing of her husband Gonzalo Rodríguez Guanga in May 2009. She had denounced the killing saying she believed the Colombian Army was responsible.

Over 50 members of the Awá communities of Nariño have been killed since September 2008 by guerrillas, the security forces and their paramilitary allies, who are contesting control of the region.

The latest killings follow a series of attacks against the Awá community. According to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), on 11 February 2009 the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) guerrilla group killed 10 Awá in the department of Nariño. This followed the killing of 17 Awá on 4 February, also reportedly carried out by the FARC.

These attacks come after a spate of death threats made by army-backed paramilitary against the indigenous organization Awá Indigenous Union, (Unidad Indígena para el Pueblo Awá) UNIPA.

“The killing of the Awá people demonstrates once again that it is the civilian population that bears the brunt of the conflict and that protection of the civilian population in areas of conflict is not given due priority by the Colombian Government,” said Susan Lee.

Amnesty International warned that it is still not clear what action the Colombian Government is taking to protect the Awá community from further attacks while it welcomed the announcement made by the Colombian authorities on 26 August committing State investigative bodies to advance criminal investigations into the killings.

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