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COLOMBIA

Human rights violations against Arhuaco Indian leaders

MARCH 1991

SUMMARY

AI INDEX: AMR 23/16/91

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Amnesty International is concerned at the abduction, torture and killing of three leaders of the Arhuaco Indians and the arbitrary detention of two others in November 1990. The Arhuaco Indians live in the Sierra Nevada mountains of Santa Marta, Magdalena department in northern Colombia.

Angel María Torres, his brother Luís Napoleón Torres and Hugues Chaparro were travelling to Bogotá by bus when they were forced by armed men in military uniforms into a vehicle which left for an unknown destination. Their bodies were later found showing signs of severe torture. The day they "disappeared", two other Arhuaco leaders were arbitrarily detained by the military and tortured before being released. They were interrogated about the kidnapping of a local landowner which had taken place several months before, apparently by a guerrilla organization active in the region.

In areas where guerrillas are active, the local population is often perceived by the armed forces as potential collaborators and has, as a result, been subjected to human rights violations. Community leaders have been particular targets.

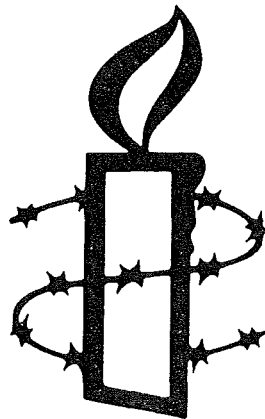
This report summarizes a four-page document (1373 words), *Colombia: Human rights violations against Arhuaco Indian leaders* (AI Index: AMR 23/16/91), issued by Amnesty International in March 1991. Anyone wanting further details or to take action on this issue should consult the full document.

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Human rights violations against Arhuaco Indian leaders

Amnesty International is concerned at the abduction, torture and killing of three leaders of the Arhuaco Indians and the arbitrary detention and torture of two others from the Sierra Nevada mountains of Santa Marta, Magdalena department, in circumstances suggesting official involvement.

At 1 pm on 28 November 1990, Luís Napoleón Torres, his brother Angel María Torres and Hugues Chaparro boarded a bus bound for Bogotá in Valledupar, the capital of Cesar department. They were seen onto the bus by the then Director of Indian Affairs in Valledupar, *Director de Asuntos Indígenas en Valledupar*, and were reportedly making the journey to the capital to protest to the government about human rights abuses of the indigenous communities of Santa Marta by the army and police force and to request better treatment in the future.

According to eye-witness reports, the bus stopped at about 4 pm, near the town of Curumaní, Cesar department and three heavily armed men wearing army uniforms forced the three Indians into a white "Toyota" van which left for an unknown destination. The driver of the bus reportedly went immediately and denounced these events to the Police Chief of Curumaní District 2, *Comandante de Policía del Segundo Distrito de Curumaní*, who sent a report of the complaint to his area authorities by post. No further action appears to have been taken by the police official to investigate the reported abduction of the three Indian leaders. Only several days later, when it became known that the three men did not arrive in Bogotá, was an intense search launched. Both the armed forces and the police denied holding them in detention. On 13 and 14 December 1990, three men's bodies were discovered and a commission of Arhuaco Indians went to identify them. Luís Napoleón Torres and Hugues Chaparro were found buried at different sites near the town of Bosconía, Cesar department and Angel María Torres in the cemetery of El Paso, Cesar, in an unmarked grave. All three bodies showed signs of severe torture.

At this point the killings were denounced to regional and national authorities and separate investigations were launched by the Procurator General's office, *Procuraduría General de la Nación*, which has a human rights monitoring role in Colombia, the Department of State Security, *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS)* and a military court, which would specifically investigate allegations of military involvement. In response to Urgent Action appeals, the Colombian Presidential Adviser on Human Rights, *Consejero Presidencial para los Derechos Humanos*, informed Amnesty

International that the Seventh Court of Criminal Instruction had also opened an investigation into the killings and possible official complicity.



Angel María Torres

Approximately eighteen thousand Arhuaco Indians live in the Sierra Nevada mountains in the north-east of Colombia in about twenty-two communities, under their own traditional and religion-based government and the civil administration of a governor and governing body. Following the discovery of the bodies of Napoleón and Angel María Torres and Hugues Chaparro, about a thousand Indians, Arhuacos, Koguis and Arzarios came down from the mountains to Valledupar to protest at the killing of their leaders and to collect their bodies for ritual burial. Luís Napoleón Torres was one of the most important Arhuaco leaders. He had been governor of the Arhuacos for seven years, and was a *mamo*, a traditional authority and spiritual guide. He had also represented the Santa Marta Indians as Head of Indian Affairs for Cesar department, *Jefe de Asuntos Indígenas del Cesar*. Hugues Chaparro was also a *mamo*. Angel María Torres was the secretary of the community government. All

three were dedicated to the preservation of their culture and traditions within modern Colombian society.

In a denunciation made to the Procurator General's office, another Arhuaco Indian, Vicente Villafañe, states that on the evening of 28 November, the day that the three Indian leaders "disappeared", he and his brother Amado were taken by force from their homes by armed soldiers. The soldiers apparently had a warrant issued by a judge to search their homes. However, the search was carried out without the presence of the judge. The search was apparently for weapons, none of which were found. The men were taken to the base of the "La Popa" army battalion in the town of Valledupar. They allege that they were blindfolded and interrogated under beatings and torture about the kidnapping, six months previously, of a wealthy local landowner and farmer. Vicente Villafañe states "each time I denied knowledge of the kidnapping, my head was pushed into water, trying to drown me," "*cada vez que yo les decía que no sabía nada sobre Mattos, me hundían la cabeza en el agua tratando de ahogarme*". He says that they were told by their interrogators that the army was holding three Indians and that "they

would begin to kill them if Mattos did not reappear" - "*iban a comenzar a matarlos si no aparecía Mattos*". During their detention, their interrogators reportedly accused the Indian leaders of involvement in the kidnapping, especially Angel María Torres and Vicente Villafañe. However Vicente states that it was well known that the army had pursued the landowner's captors on the night he was kidnapped, reportedly members of the guerrilla organización *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC)*, Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces and had recovered a vehicle allegedly used by the FARC in the kidnapping.

The Villafañe brothers were informed by those holding them that among their interrogators were the kidnapped landowner's bodyguards, who had allegedly paid the army to be allowed to interrogate them. On one occasion, when they were not wearing blindfolds, Vicente Villafañe alleges that he was severely beaten by the brother of the landowner in the presence of the Battalion commander and an army officer.

On 30 November 1990, an officer from the battalion reportedly took Vicente Villafañe by helicopter to the Arhuaco community of Santo Domingo and demanded that he show him where the guerrillas were. That same day three helicopters of soldiers from the La Popa battalion reportedly landed in the community and terrorized the inhabitants, searching houses and firing their weapons. They later left, allegedly taking with them food from the community school, medical instruments from the community health centre and documentation from the police post. The Villafañe brothers were released shortly afterwards.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Guerrillas from the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces have been a presence in the Sierra Nevada mountains for some ten years. The indigenous community have reportedly made repeated requests to the guerrillas that they leave the area and have asked the Minister of Defense for assistance, but apparently without results.

Amnesty International has received reports that guerrilla groups in all areas of Colombia have been responsible for kidnappings and the execution of captives. Victims of guerrilla movements have included military and police agents, people suspected of being armed forces informers, petty criminals, members of rival groups and peasant and Indian community leaders who refuse to accept the authority of the guerrillas in the areas they claim to control. In recent years armed forces counter-insurgency operations have been progressively intensified to combat the country's guerrilla groups. In areas where guerrilla forces are active, the local population is often perceived by the armed forces as potential collaborators and has, as a result, been subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture,

"disappearance" and extrajudicial execution by army personnel and civilians working for them. Civic and community leaders, including leaders of Indigenous communities in areas where guerrilla forces are active, have been particular targets.

Referring to the killing of the Arhuaco leaders, a *personero*, human rights ombudsman, from Cesar department reportedly stated "The Indians are accused of kidnappings carried out by the guerrillas and, for this reason, are caught between two fires; between the FARC who hide kidnap victims in the reserves and the military who go up to look for them." *A los indios los acusan de los secuestros que cometen los guerrilleros y, por eso, están entre la espada y la pared: entre los de las FARC que esconden a los secuestrados en la reserva y entre los militares que suben para buscarlos.*"



Arhuaco Indians from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta