URGENT ACTION

PROTECT DEFENDERS FROM ARMED GROUPS

On 30 November 2024 and again in 02 January 2025 CREDHOS publicly denounced that the armed group Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia – EGC (also known as Clan del Golfo or Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC) has a plan to murder CREDHOS' president Iván Madero. CREDHOS' members, as well as other civil society organisations and communities of the Magdalena Medio region such as FEDEPESAN have been threatened and stigmatized for over a year, as part of the armed group's process of territorial, political, economic, and social control, expansion and strengthening in the region. We call on the Colombian state to guarantee the protection of the civil society organisations and communities of the Magdalena Medio region.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

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Dear Mr. Minister,

I am writing to express my deep concern with risk faced to the life, the safety and the security of the members of civil society organisations and communities at the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, particularly the Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos – CREDHOS, and the Federación de Pescadores Artesanales Ambientalistas y Turísticos del Departamento de Santander – FEDEPESAN, located in Barrancabermeja.

CREDHOS denounced publicly that written threats were publicly released on 30 October 2024 under the name of the Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC), threatening CREDHOS, FEDEPESAN and other civil society organisations. On January 1st 2025 another public threat against CREDHOS was known. This follows many other threats received during the last months, declaring them a "military objective", stigmatizing them as collaborators with other armed groups and trying to force them to leave the area. CREDHOS has also denounced the harm caused to entire communities of Magdalena Medio, as the one of San Lorenzo, in the municipality of Cantagallo, Bolivar department, where the EGC threatened the entire local community assembly to put it under its control and forced the displacement of several families. CREDHOS documented during October and November that people in the rural areas of Magdalena Medio have heard about plans of the EGC to attack CREDHOS president Iván Madero.

For years, Amnesty International has documented the human rights defence work and the risk situation of CREDHOS and FEDEPESAN. Their members continue to be attacked for defending the rights of the communities of Magdalena Medio, and the state's response remains insufficient.

I urge you to exercise the utmost diligence in effectively fulfilling the Ministry of Interior's duty to implement the decrees 2078 of 2017 and 660 of 2018, in so far as they require you and other authorities to protect human rights defenders trough mechanisms of prevention and collective protection, and to guarantee the safety of organisations such as CREDHOS and FEDEPESAN, in the context of persistent threats against members of civil society organisations and communities in the Magdalena Medio region.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The **Magdalena Medio** is an extensive valley between the Colombian mountain ranges crossed by Colombia's main river, the Magdalena River. Petroleum is one of the major sources of economic activity in the region, where the country's largest refinery operates in the city of Barrancabermeja, Santander, at the heart of the Magdalena Medio. The area also engages in agro-industry, mining, livestock, among other economic activities. Due to its location and the abundance of valuable resources like oil and water, the region is considered strategic and has been the subject of continuous disputes between the State and armed groups present in the country. The Magdalena Medio has also been a stage for sustained processes of popular mobilization and human rights advocacy for decades. The combination of unions, feminist, popular movements, and human rights defence has created particularly strong scenarios of assertion and resistance. This, coupled with the dispute for territorial, political, and economic control of the region by interest groups and armed factions, has fostered a breeding ground for violence against human rights defenders that has persisted since at least the 1980s. In 2023, alarming figures of violence against the civilian population, especially homicides, were recorded in the Magdalena Medio. This trend continues in 2024. All of this unfolds in a context of fight between at least four armed groups present in the region, including the Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC), also known as AGC or Clan del Golfo, currently the biggest armed group of the country and with the wider regional control.

The Federation of Artisanal, Environmentalist, and Tourist Fishers of the Department of Santander (**FEDEPESAN**) carries out its work in the San Silvestre lake, in the vicinity of the city of Barrancabermeja. FEDEPESAN has reported water pollution by regional companies and the presence of criminal organisations engaged in drug and human trafficking. In this context, the president of FEDEPESAN, Yuly Velázquez, has experienced numerous forms of violence documented by Amnesty International, including a threat in November 2020, bullet impacts on her home in January 2021, intimidations during protest activities in August 2021, a firearm attack in May 2022, and another in July 2022 (resulting in an injury to a security guard of her protection scheme). In February 2021 Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action after serious threats against the vice-President of FEDEPESAN. Amnesty International has documented deficiencies in the functioning of the protection scheme provided by the state through the National Protection Unit – UNP to Yuly Velásquez, due to her high level of risk.

The Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (**CREDHOS**), also based in Barrancabermeja, was founded in 1987 and Amnesty International has monitored its situation for several years. In 2000, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued precautionary measures to CREDHOS due to threats from paramilitary groups. In 2016, the Colombian Government's Victims Unit recognized CREDHOS as a subject of collective reparation for having suffered, as a collective, serious human rights violations.

CREDHOS has highlighted recent operations of the Colombian police and of the General Attorney Office against the EGC, for example, the capture of AKA “Bernabé” in September 2024, accused of being responsible of the murder of Filadelfo Anzola, a human rights defender member of CREDHOS. But CREDHOS analysis emphasises the involvement of members and retired members of the military forces in the armed group EGC. For instance, in September 2024 a Police operation against the EGC resulted in the killing of AKA “Zeus”, a retired member of the Army of Colombia, who until August had been accepted to testify before the transitional justice tribunal (the Special Jurisdiction for Peace – JEP) and who had previously been denounced by CREDHOS as a commander of the EGC in the Magdalena Medio region. Also, the capture by the police of the retired colonel of the Army of Colombia José Alejandro Castro Cadavid, who was an active member of the Army until 2022, and is accused by the General Attorney Office of being a commander of the EGC in the south of the Bolivar department, an area that is part of the Magdalena Medio region.

Amnesty International has confirmed that the threats and victimization against CREDHOS’ members as a collective have persisted in recent years, in the context of the presence of armed groups in the territory where they work. Amnesty International has issued Urgent Actions in April 2021, and recently two on 9 and 14 February 2024, highlighting that the protection currently provided by the State is insufficient for the level of collective threat that CREDHOS is experiencing, and asking for a more comprehensive protection. Also, asking the Attorney General to investigate the attacks against CREDHOS’ members. This third urgent action follows public denounces made by CREDHOS in November 2024 and January 2025.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Spanish. You may also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 09 April 2025

NAME: CREDHOS & FEDEPESAN

PREVIOUS UA: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/7747/2024/en/