

21 September

Colombia: Women's bodies used as a battleground

[Action extract]

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[Action text]

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During the course of Colombia's 40-year-old conflict, all the armed groups – the security forces, army-backed paramilitaries and the guerrilla – have sexually abused or exploited women and girls. They have sought to control the most intimate parts of women's lives.

These violations, committed against civilians and armed group's own combatants, have remained behind a wall of silence, hidden by discrimination and impunity.

In early May 2003, rapes, killings and other attacks against civilians allegedly carried out by soldiers identifying themselves paramilitaries in Tame Municipality, Arauca Department, led to the displacement of over 500 people. In the village of Parreros, armed men raped and killed pregnant 16-year-old Omaira Fernández, and then ripped open her belly. According to one source, *"[t]hey opened her up in front of everyone. The bodies of the girl and the baby were thrown in the river."*

Guerrilla forces have also been responsible for repeated cases of violence against women, including rape. One woman told how she was raped by a FARC guerrilla : *"He raped me and told me that it was a little reminder... not to get mixed up with soldiers"*

Yet despite the gravity of such crimes, no real efforts have been made to fully investigate them, to bring to justice those responsible, or to prevent these atrocities happening in future.

All sides to the conflict must take action. Guerrilla forces must commit to upholding international humanitarian law. The Colombian government must act to prevent and punish all acts of violence against women. Only then will the people of Colombia have the opportunity to build a future safe from the threat of violence against women.

[Call to action]

Take action!

Write to the President of Colombia, demanding he takes immediate action to protect women from violence. You could base your letters on the sample below.

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear President Álvaro Uribe Vélez

I am writing to express my outrage about the widespread attacks on women and girls, including rape and murder, which are taking place during Colombia's armed conflict.

These attacks are being carried out by members of security forces, army-backed paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. Yet your government appears to be doing too little to ensure that those responsible for such attacks are investigated and prevented from carrying out further abuses.

All governments have a duty to prevent, punish and stop violence against women. The guerrilla groups, which are responsible for repeated violations of international humanitarian law, must also assume their responsibility for acts of violence against women.

It is now over a year since XVIII Brigade troops identifying themselves as paramilitaries entered Parreros in Tame Municipality, Arauca Department, and reportedly raped and killed pregnant 16-year-old Omaira Fernández. In the nearby community of Velasqueros, paramilitaries raped three young girls. There is no evidence that those responsible for committing such crimes are being brought to justice.

I urge you to acknowledge that violence against women is an integral part of the serious human rights crisis facing Colombia, and to publicly condemn this violence.

In particular, I would urge you to use your influence to immediately end abuses against women by forces under government control; to ensure that all reports of sexual violence committed by members of the security forces, paramilitary groups and guerrilla groups are investigated; and to guarantee the protection of women and respect for women's rights by implementing UN recommendations and other international human rights standards.

Yours sincerely,

Address:

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For further information, please see [*Colombia : "Scarred bodies, hidden crimes" : Sexual violence against women in the armed conflict*, AI Index : AMR 23/040/2004]