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Colombia: Another Massacre as Colombian Army Prepares to Receive US Military Aid

"How many times do killings committed by the security forces or their paramilitary allies have to be denounced before the Colombian government brings the perpetrators to justice?" asked Amnesty International as six men were killed and 63 families of La Unión have begun to flee their homes.

In the wake of yet another massacre against inhabitants of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, municipality of Apartadó (northern department of Antioquia), Amnesty International urged the international community to stop being a bystander and to take effective action to stop the killings.

At least six men from the village La Unión were shot dead on 8 July 2000: Rigoberto Guzmán, Elodino Rivera, Diofanor Correa, Humberto Sepúlveda, Pedro Zapata, Jaime Guzmán. On that same day approximately 20 hooded men had entered the village, which is part of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. Reportedly, a helicopter belonging to the XVII Brigade of the army had flown overhead and troops attached to the XVII Brigade were camped nearby.

The soldiers searched each house in La Unión and took the inhabitants to the centre of the village where the men were separated from the women and children. After shooting the six men, the community was then ordered to leave: "*Tienen 20 días para desalojar toda la zona, porque esto lo vamos a acabar.*" ("You have 20 days to leave the region, because we are not having any more of this.")

While this was happening in La Unión some peasant farmers travelling on the road between Apartadó and San José de Apartadó were reportedly detained by the army. Two of them were threatened and reportedly told that they were operating with paramilitary forces: "*vamos juntos y vamos a terminar con todo.*" ("We are together and we are going to finish this off.")

On the day of the massacre the military personnel camped around La Unión reportedly stated several times that there were guerrillas within the village. Two days earlier, in another village belonging to the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, military personnel had stated that: "*La Comunidad de Paz es una comunidad de guerrilleros. Vamos a ingresar con los paramilitaries.*" ("The Peace Community is a community of guerrillas. We are going to go in with the paramilitaries.")

Military authorities denied having any presence in the La Unión area when notified of the massacre by national and international representatives. In response, they said they would send *Batallón Contra-Guerrilla No. 35 Díaz López* (Counter-Guerrilla Battalion No. 35 Díaz López).

On Monday, 3 July a large number of troops belonging to the *Batallón Bejaranos* (Bejaranos Battalion) and *Batallón Contra-Guerrilla No. 35 Díaz López*, both attached to the

Brigada XVII (XVII Brigade of the Colombian Army), marching along the road between Apartadó and San José de Apartadó were observed on their way up the Abibe mountain range (*Serranía de Abibe*). At least two armed men wearing army-style uniforms, but wearing no insignia, were also seen amongst the soldiers.

"The Colombian government must urgently bring human rights violators to justice, to break the links between the armed forces and illegal paramilitary groups and dismantle paramilitary organizations in line with repeated UN recommendations," Amnesty International urged.

"The human rights clauses built into the U.S.A. military aid package are meaningless unless decisive steps are taken immediately. The international community must act now before the human rights crisis is deepened by the increased military aid. With no controls the increased military aid could deepen the human rights crisis by boosting the confidence of the Colombian armed forces in the implementation of its counter-insurgency strategy, characterized by the widespread and systematic violation of human rights."

Background Information

San José de Apartadó is made up of 32 communities. It is the community's location and the frequent presence of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, in the area which has resulted in the inhabitants of San José de Apartadó being labelled subversives or subversive sympathizers by the security forces and their paramilitary allies.

Faced with the constant threat of forced displacement and further human rights violations, the communities sought the support of the Catholic Church and Colombian human rights organizations to examine strategies which would enable the community to resist forcible displacement. This led to members of 17 of the communities of San José de Apartadó declaring themselves a *Comunidad de Paz* (Peace Community) on 23 March 1997. This declaration represented a call to the warring factions on both sides of the conflict to respect the right of the civilian population not to be drawn into the conflict and to respect the communities' right to life.

Over 60 members of the community of San José de Apartadó have been killed by members of the Colombian Army, their paramilitary auxiliaries and by the FARC, since March 1997. The army and their paramilitary allies have since labelled members of the community as guerrilla sympathizers while guerrilla forces have accused them of siding with their enemies. For more information please see Amnesty International report [Colombia: Return to Hope](#) June 2000 (AI Index: AMR 23/23/00).

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