

EXTERNAL

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"Disappearance" / Fear for Safety

28 February 1996

COLOMBIA

Alejandro Matia HERNÁNDEZ VAN-STRAHLEN, trade unionist
Hermes CASTRO

Hermes Castro and Alejandro Matia Hernández Van-Strahlen have not been seen since 16 February 1996, when witnesses saw them being abducted by members of the security forces in the town of Barranquilla, department of Atlántico. Amnesty International is deeply concerned for their safety.

According to information received, the two men were having refreshments at a street stall opposite the *Cárcel Modelo*, a prison in the centre of Barranquilla, waiting for their relatives who were visiting a friend in the prison, when several heavily armed men arrived in three vehicles. The men forced Alejandro Matia Hernández and Hermes Castro into one of the vehicles and drove away.

Several elements of the abduction indicate that it was a security force operation. According to witnesses, one of the abductors was wearing a tunic of the *Servicio de Investigaciones Judiciales e Inteligencia* (SIJIN), Judicial Investigations and Intelligence Service, an intelligence unit of the Colombian National Police. Furthermore, reports indicate that the street in which the abduction took place was at the time being heavily patrolled by army and police agents, who were policing carnival celebrations taking place in the city. Vehicles had been prohibited from the street that day.

Efforts by relatives to locate the two men at the SIJIN offices in Barranquilla and elsewhere have been unsuccessful. Alejandro Matia Hernández's relatives have denounced his "disappearance" to the *Defensoría del Pueblo*, Office of the People's Defender, the *Fiscalía General de la Nación*, Office of the Attorney General, and to the *Policía Nacional*, National Police.

Alejandro Matia Hernández was a trade union leader in the CICOLAC factory in Curumaní, department of Cesar, before he was forced to flee the town in 1988 after receiving death threats. He moved to Santa Marta, department of Magdalena, but once again had to flee in the face of death threats. He had only recently moved to Barranquilla.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In recent years widespread and systematic human rights violations have occurred in Colombia, including extrajudicial executions, "disappearance", torture and arbitrary arrest. Trade unionists and other popular activists together with peasant farmers are amongst those who have frequently been the victims. President Ernesto Samper Pizano, who assumed office on 7 August 1994, has publicly stated that tackling the human rights situation will be a priority for his government. However, members of the Colombian armed and security forces, together with their paramilitary allies, continue to commit serious abuses with virtual impunity. Only exceptionally are perpetrators brought to justice; the vast majority of members of the armed and security forces responsible for gross human rights violations remain in active service.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing deep concern for the safety of Alejandro Matia Hernández Van-Strahlen and Hermes Castro whose whereabouts have been unknown since their reported abduction by members of the security forces on 16 February 1996 in Barranquilla, department of Atlántico;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into their "disappearance", the results of which should be made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- urging that if they are in detention, they be treated humanely and allowed access to lawyers, relatives and medical treatment;
- urging that they be charged with a recognizable offence or immediately released.

APPEALS TO:

1) President of Colombia:

Señor Presidente Ernesto Samper Pizano
 Presidente de la República
 Palacio de Nariño
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: President Samper Pizano, Bogotá, Colombia

Telexes: 44281 PALP CO

Faxes: + 57 1 289 3377/286 7434

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/ Dear President Samper

2) Minister of Defence

Dr. Juan Carlos Esguerra Portocarrero
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

Telegrams: Ministro de Defensa , Bogota, Colombia

Telexes: 42411 INPRE CO; 44561 CFAC CO

Faxes: + 57 1 222 1874/288 4906

Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

3) Minister of the Interior

Dr. Horacio Serpa Uribe
 Ministro del Interior
 Ministerio del Interior
 Carrera 8a, No.8-09, Piso 7
 Santafé de Bogotá
 COLOMBIA

Telegrams: Ministro del Interior Serpa, Bogota, Colombia

Telexes: 45406 MINGO CO

Faxes: + 57 1 286 0053/ 286 0485

Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

4) Attorney General

Dr. Alfonso Valdivieso Sarmiento
 Fiscal General de la Nación
 Fiscalía General de la Nación
 Apartado Aéreo 29855
 Santafé de Bogotá
 Colombia

Telegrams: Fiscal General Valdivieso, Fiscalía General, Bogotá, Colombia
Faxes: + 57 1 245 5292 or 287 0939 or 288 2828
Salutation: Estimado Dr. Valdivieso/Dear Dr. Valdivieso

COPIES TO:

Association for Relatives of the "Disappeared"

Señores

ASFADDES

AA 011446

Santafé de Bogotá

Colombia

and to diplomatic representatives of Colombia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 25 April 1996.