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Colombian activists: systematically attacked and discredited

Human rights defenders in Colombia face a systematic campaign of attacks and their work has been publicly discredited by President Uribe and his government.

Act now to stop human rights abuses against activists.

Defenders of human rights like **Hermes Vallejo**, **Teresa Yarce** and **Orlando Valencia** (see left-hand margin) peacefully promote and protect human rights for all people.

In Colombia, human rights activists work in extremely difficult conditions – trying to protect human rights in a country suffering an internal armed conflict; and struggling against a systematic campaign to **discredit** their work.

Publicly labelling human rights activists "**subversive**", President Álvaro Uribe and his government have undermined their work thereby perpetuating human rights abuses in Colombia. Uribe has called them "**defenders of terrorism**" - accusing activists of being terrorists hiding behind a human rights agenda. The security forces, paramilitaries and sometimes guerrillas attack activists, exploiting the fact that human rights work is officially discredited.

The cases of Hermes, Teresa and Orlando illustrate the realities of activists peacefully protecting human rights, that have nothing to do with terrorism.

Many activists are **threatened**, physically **attacked** and **prosecuted** on unfounded charges. Their attackers are rarely brought to justice. The purpose of these attacks against human rights activists is to **clamp down** on their reporting of human rights abuses and of links between paramilitary groups and the army.

Some activists are threatened so frequently, they consider it part of their daily routine. Others had to leave their communities; and many have been killed.

Pressure - national and international - on the Colombian government has prompted the development of programmes aimed at **protecting activists**, trade unionists and journalists. Unfortunately, practical protection methods are limited steps tackling the symptoms and not the causes of attacks on human rights activists.

The Colombian state has the **obligation** to create the basic conditions for human rights campaigners to work freely. The **President must recognize publicly** the legitimacy of human rights work and **end the impunity** for human rights abuses against activists.

Call on President Uribe to commit publicly to supporting the legitimate activities of human rights activists and end abuses against them. Do this by writing to the Colombian Ambassador in your country.

Dear Ambassador / President,

I urge you to [call on President Uribe to]:

Publicly recognize the legitimacy of human rights activists;

Ensure that those responsible for human rights violations are brought to justice;

Prevent the use of unfounded criminal charges against human rights activists.

Yours sincerely,

Write to the Colombian Ambassador in your country

[Ambassadors' contact details](#) (Click on this link to find contact details)

[\[http://www.thedailyjournalonline.com/article.asp?ArticleId=197920&CategoryId=13305\]](http://www.thedailyjournalonline.com/article.asp?ArticleId=197920&CategoryId=13305)

If there is no official Colombian representation in your country, write to a Colombian Ambassador in your region.

Click on the images below (pop-up windows)



Hermes Vallejo - a peasant farmer leader

Colombian activist - Hermes Vallejo Jiménez

A peasant farmer leader and one of the founders of the Association of Medium and Small Farmers of Tolima Department, Hermes Vallejo was detained in Bogotá on 13 August 2003 by the security forces. His arrest was part of a coordinated series of mass arrests.

Hermes was accused of being a member of a guerrilla group and remained in detention for over a year until a court declared the charges against him unfounded and released him on bail.



He had been detained on the basis of statements made by two former alleged guerrilla members. The court examining the case against Hermes Vallejo and several others, established that the informants had been given access to allegations made in intelligence documents. Investigations carried out by the Procurator General uncovered evidence that the two witnesses who testified against Hermes were offered money and support to secure their certificates of reinsertion into civilian life in return for making statements against several individuals.

Fears that he might be attacked by paramilitary groups if he returns to the department of Tolima have forced Hermes to remain internally displaced - far from his home and work.

[\[Link 2\]](#)



Teresa Yarce - with a women's organization working for peace

Colombian activist - Teresa Yarce

Teresa Yarce, an active member of the Women's Association of Las Independencias (AMI), was working with other AMI members to promote human rights: encouraging people to report human rights violations and to campaign against the militarization and increasing paramilitary control over their local neighbourhood. She also exposed cases of corruption by authorities in the local municipality.



Since 2002, Teresa and other AMI members had received repeated death threats. On 12 November 2002, she was detained together with two other AMI members and accused of rebellion. Her detention came only four days after she had participated in a meeting with the municipal government about human rights abuses committed by the security forces and paramilitary groups. She was released after nine days due to lack of evidence and the criminal investigation against her was closed in February 2003.

On 6 October 2004, Teresa was shot dead in a poor district of Medellín. According to witnesses, she was shot by a man who lived in a neighbouring area and was a known member of a paramilitary group.

About three hours after Teresa Yarce was shot, a known paramilitary approached another AMI member who had witnessed the shooting. He told her that the paramilitaries were celebrating and threatened to kill her and another AMI member who had been detained with Teresa in 2002.

[Link 3]



Orlando Valencia - fighting for collective rights of Afro-descendant communities

Colombian activist - Orlando Valencia

Orlando Valencia was one of the leaders of the Afro-descendant communities fighting for their collective rights: demanding land rights; highlighting environmental problems on the African palm plantations; and calling on the Colombian authorities to respect their rights as civilians in the armed conflict.

He publicly campaigned against alleged illegal occupation of collective land for the plantation of African palm by powerful economic sectors with the help of paramilitary groups.

On the 15 October 2005, Orlando was travelling with nine other members of his community, a lawyer from Justice and Peace and an observer from a Canadian organization (Colombia Solidarity and Accompaniment Project), when the group was stopped by the police at approximately 9am. According to witnesses, a vehicle with known paramilitaries was seen closeby.



By 12.30pm all had been released by the police, but Orlando was stopped by two paramilitaries on a motorcycle who ordered him to get onto the vehicle saying "let's go or we'll finish you off here".

On 24 October 2005, the body of Orlando Valencia was found in the León River, shot in the forehead and his wrists had ligature marks.