

EXTERNAL

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EXTRA 50/97

Fear of refoulement / Fear for safety

4 April 1997

PANAMA

Refugee peasant farmers from the Urabá region of Colombia

Over 200 Colombian refugees, mainly women and children, who have fled to Panama in recent days, may face forcible return to Colombia where their physical safety would be at serious risk.

According to reports, the peasant farmers have been crossing the border between the two countries to escape an upsurge in violence in the Colombian border province of Chocó, between left-wing guerrillas, paramilitary groups and the military. The refugees are living in temporary camps near the village of Boca de Cupé, Yape. Amnesty International fears that the Panamanian authorities may attempt to forcibly return them, as happened in similar circumstances last year (see below).

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which Panama has ratified, specifically states that no one may be deported to a country where he or she could face grave human rights abuses.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This is the third time in the past year that Colombians escaping political violence have sought refuge in Panama. In similar circumstances in 1996, 400 Colombians crossed into Panama to escape intense paramilitary operations in neighbouring Colombian provinces (see UA 278/96, AMR 01/13/96, 28 November 1996). As soon as the Panamanian authorities became aware of their presence, they organized their deportation to Colombia in collaboration with the Colombian Air Force, which provided an aeroplane and returned the first group on 23 November.

The group of 88 refugees deported included 32 minors. After their repatriation from Panama, the refugees were housed in the *Hogar Juvenil de Apartadó*, Apartadó's Children's Home, where conditions were reportedly cramped and unsanitary. The rural and urban areas of Apartadó province are also experiencing a high level of paramilitary violence.

International pressure, including appeals from the UA Network, together with requests made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), led the Panamanian authorities to halt further deportations.

The increase in violence in the area of Riosucio, in the region of Urabá in Chocó province, Colombia, has provoked a new influx of refugees. In March 1997, at least 23 Colombians sought refuge in Panama. Amnesty International has written to the government of Panama urging that the new refugees should not be deported. However, with the numbers of refugees increasing daily it is feared that the government may resort once again to deportation.

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

- reminding the authorities of Panama's obligation under the international principle of *non-refoulement*, that is, not to forcibly return anyone to a country where he or she would be at risk of serious human rights violations, referring to Article 33 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Panama is a state party;

- urging the Panamanian authorities to take all appropriate and necessary steps to ensure the safety and well-being of the Colombian refugees in its territory.

APPEALS TO:

1) President of the Republic

S.E. Ernesto Pérez Balladares
Presidente de la República
Palacio Presidencial
Valija 50, Panamá 1, REPUBLICA DE PANAMA
Telegrams: Presidente Balladares, Panamá
Telexes: 2770 PRESIPA PG
Faxes: + 507 2 27-6818
Salutation: Sr. Presidente/Dear President

2) Minister of Government and Justice

Sr. Raúl Montenegro
Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia
Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia
Apartado 1628, Panamá 1, REPUBLICA DE PANAMA
Telegrams: Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia, Panamá
Telexes: 2746
Faxes: + 507 2 12-0372
Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister

3) Minister of Foreign Affairs

Sr. Gabriel Lewis Galindo
Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores
Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores
C. 34 Plaza Porras, Panamá 4, REPUBLICA DE PANAMA
Telegrams: Ministro de relaciones Exteriores, Panamá
Telex: 2771 EXTPAN PG
Faxes: + 507 2 11-0416
Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

1) Human Rights Organization

Srs Centro de Investigación de los Derechos Humanos y Socorro Jurídico de Panamá
Apartado Postal 10215, Panamá 4, PANAMA
Faxes: +507 2 23 2595

2) Human Rights Organization

Sres Asociación Regional para Las Migraciones Forzadas
Apartado 862 - C.P. 2050 San Pedro de Montes de Oca
San José, Costa Rica
Fax: 506 255 0733

and to diplomatic representatives of Panama accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 7 May 1997.