

EXTERNAL

AI Index: AMR 44/04/97

21 April 1997

Further information on EXTRA 50/97 (AMR 44/01/97, 4 April 1997) - Fear of refoulement / Fear for safety

PANAMA Refugee peasant farmers from the Urabá region of Colombia

Amnesty International condemns the Panamanian authorities' decision to forcibly return more than 300 Colombian refugees.

The refugees, mainly women and some 177 children, had fled to Panama to escape the violence pervading their home region of north-west Colombia.

Panamanian authorities did not fulfil their pledge to allow officials from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to visit the refugees and assess their condition and their willingness to return. Instead, in coordination with Colombian authorities, they began forcibly returning the refugees on 18 April and continued the operation over the weekend of 19/20 April.

According to reports, Colombian Air Force helicopters were used to return the refugees over the border to the area of Cupica and Bahía Solano, on Colombia's north-west Pacific coast, in the province of Chocó. Representatives of neither the UNHCR nor the International Committee of the Red Cross were allowed to see them before their removal.

There are reports that the Colombian government has guaranteed the refugees' safety. In a similar incident last year (UA 278/96, AMR 01/13/96, 28 November 1996), 88 Colombians were forcibly returned from Panama with their safety supposedly guaranteed by the Colombian authorities. However, the Colombian authorities were not able to provide adequate protection and one of the group has, reportedly, since been murdered. In the light of this, together with north-west Colombia's endemic violence, guarantees of this type are meaningless.

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

- condemning the Panamanian authorities' decision to forcibly return the refugees;
- calling on the authorities to halt further forced returns of refugees and to abide by its international obligations on the non-refoulement of refugees;
- urging the authorities to grant any present or future refugees on its territory, fully effective and durable protection.

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

Dr. Ricardo Alberto Arias
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: +507 269 4077

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 25 May 1997.