

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 23/028/2001

Further information on UA 22/01 (AMR 23/008/2001, 29 January 2001) - Fear for Safety 8 March 2001

COLOMBIA Women human rights activists of the *Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)*, Women's Popular Organization

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Activists from the *Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)*, Women's Popular Organization, have been attacked and threatened by paramilitaries as they organized a celebration of International Women's Day, which is on 8 March.

On 7 March two OFP members were handing out leaflets to promote the activities they were organising. At about 10.15am a group of men approached them, who said they were members of the paramilitary group *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)*, United Self-defence Forces of Colombia. The men snatched the leaflets and burned them. They also threatened the women, and told them to leave the area.

Later that day, at about 5pm, OFP president Yolanda Becerra received a call on her mobile phone in which a threatening voice told her she would have to "take the consequences" ("*aténgase a las consecuencias*").

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Army-backed paramilitaries are now in the final stages of a campaign for control of the Magdalena Medio region. In the last four years they have already taken over almost all the region, massacring civilians and killing community activists. As the principal city and river port of the region, Barrancabermeja is their last key target. The OFP, and the few other human rights defenders still working in the town, are now the only force standing up to enormous pressure from paramilitary groups to collaborate with them. The paramilitaries are therefore intent on driving all human rights activists out of the town. Those who do not leave or agree to collaborate are at very grave risk. Human rights groups have consistently said that only international support will enable them to continue their work.

The OFP has been working to promote women's human rights in Barrancabermeja and the surrounding Magdalena Medio region for 29 years. They refuse to cooperate with paramilitary groups, and so face continual threats and harassment. The authorities have done little to protect them. One paramilitary gunman was arrested for threatening workers at the OFP centre on 27 January, but he was released only two days later.

Amnesty International is concerned that despite a heavy security force presence in Barrancabermeja, where a special forces unit was deployed in January, paramilitary forces have apparently been able to operate unhindered. The paramilitaries are reported to have set up checkpoints and to have killed several people in recent weeks. Although the precise location of these checkpoints have been reported to the security forces, they have taken no action to confront the paramilitaries.

Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies continue to commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. Paramilitary groups have killed several thousand civilians over the past five years. The Colombian government suspended the constitutional legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the armed forces to combat and disband such groups in 1989,

yet they continue to work with the support of the security forces in many areas of the country.

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

- expressing concern that army-backed paramilitaries have again intimidated and threatened workers of the *Organización Femenina Popular (OFP)*;
- urging the Colombian authorities to take action to protect all OFP human rights activists, in line with formal requests by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights;
- asking them to order an immediate, impartial and full investigation into the threats, and bring those responsible to justice;
- expressing concern that even though a much publicized special forces unit was recently sent into Barrancabermeja, ostensibly to combat paramilitary forces, they have taken no decisive action against paramilitary forces in the city, whose whereabouts have been reported to the authorities;
- reminding the Colombian government to adhere to its obligations regarding human rights defenders, as laid out in United Nations (UN) and Organization of American States (OAS) declarations, and urging it to follow the UN's repeated recommendations that it should take measures to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders.

**APPEALS TO:**

President of the Republic

Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana Arango  
 Presidente de la República  
 Palacio de Nariño  
 Carrera 8 No.7-26

Santafé de Bogotá, COLOMBIA

**Fax: + 57 1 336 2109 / 337 1351**

**Salutation: Dear President / Excmo. Sr. Presidente**

Vice-President of the Republic

Señor Vicepresidente Gustavo Bell Lemus  
 Alto Consejero Presidencial para asuntos de Derechos Humanos y lucha Contra la Corrupción

Cra. 8 #7-26, Palacio de Nariño,  
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Faxes: + 57 1 337 1350 / 337 1351**

**Salutation: Excmo. Sr. Vicepresidente / Dear Vice-President**

Minister of Defence

Dr. Luis Fernando Ramírez Acuña  
 Ministro de Defensa Nacional  
 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional  
 Avenida Eldorado CAN - Carrera 52  
 Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia

**Telegram: Ministro de Defensa, Bogotá, Colombia**

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**Salutation: Dear Minister / Sr. Ministro**

Governor of Santander Department

Gobernador del Departamento de Santander  
 Sr. Jorge Eliecer Gómez Villamizar

Gobernación de Santander  
Calle 37, No. 10-30  
Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia  
**Faxes: + 57 76 339889**  
**Salutation: Dear Governor / Sr. Gobernador**

**COPIES TO:**

Women's grass-roots organization  
*Organización Femenina Popular*  
Cra 22 No 52B - 36  
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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 19 April 2001.