

£COLOMBIA

@Human rights lawyer is threatened and attacked

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo and other members of the small Regional Human Rights Committee, Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS), in Barrancabermeja, Santander department. Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo has faced repeated threats and recently survived an armed attack on his life. The organization is particularly concerned that the recent atmosphere of threats against human rights workers in Colombia, has been exacerbated by national press reports implicating various named human rights defenders as members of guerrilla organizations.

Following statements by local military commanders in February 1992 linking CREDHOS to guerrilla organizations, threats from paramilitary forces against CREDHOS members increased. The so-called Ariel Otero Command, Comando Ariel Otero, distributed menacing leaflets in the Barrancabermeja region:

"Denunciamos y Exigimos a la procuraduría general de la Nación [sic] abrir investigación a la oficina de derechos humanos ... por ser manejada por integrantes del E.L.N. Si esta investigación no se realiza extrminaremos dichos guerrilleros y haremos justicia por nuestra propia mano."

We denounce and demand that the Procurator General's Office open and investigation into the human rights office ... for being used by members of the ELN¹. If this investigation does not take place we will exterminate these guerrillas and take justice into our own hands."

On 2 July 1992 Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo received information warning him that personnel from the intelligence unit of the National Police (F-2) had arrived in the town of Barrancabermeja with the intention of killing him. Although it is not possible for Amnesty International to verify the information received by Dr. Gómez Lizarazo, the organization believes that in view of the recent attacks against CREDHOS members, the Colombian authorities should take urgent measures to protect the life of Dr. Gómez Lizarazo.

¹ National Liberation Army, Ejército de Liberación Nacional

On 10 June 1992 Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo and two other CREDHOS members survived an armed attack on the vehicles in which they were travelling. According to eye-witnesses, Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, Nancy Sánchez, a journalist, and Pablo Arenas, were travelling together with three others, Evangelina Marín and Gilberto Carreño, both community workers, and Jorge Galindo, a member of the General Workers' Union, Unión Sindical Obrera at approximately midday in the Antonio Nariño suburb of Barrancabermeja. The two taxis in which they were travelling came under sustained fire from at least six heavily armed men. Although the vehicles were seriously damaged in the attack, Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo and the five other occupants escaped unhurt. The commission was returning from a suburb of Barrancabermeja where they had been collecting testimonies from relatives of four people killed by unidentified gunmen the previous day. The incident was the latest in a series of attacks against CREDHOS.

On 29 January 1992 as Blanca Valero de Durán, secretary of CREDHOS, and Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo's personal assistant, left the human rights office at about 6.30pm two armed men in civilian clothes fired several shots at her at point blank range. She reportedly died instantly. The two assailants escaped. Blanca Valero was married with three children. Three policemen across the street reportedly ignored her cries for help and made no attempt to pursue the assailants who have still not been identified.

Another member of CREDHOS, Julio César Berrío Villegas, was shot dead on 28 June 1992 at 5pm by two unidentified gunmen in an ice-cream parlour in Barrancabermeja. He had worked for CREDHOS for two years as a security guard protecting the Committee's offices. He had also been involved in the investigation into the accidental death of a child in Arnales district by members of the police intelligence unit F-2. According to El Tiempo, Colombia's largest national daily newspaper, Barrancabermeja Police Captain Germán Campuzano Gómez stated that Julio César Berrío was a guerrilla.

At the funeral of Julio César Berrío, Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo stated that the human rights group may have to close because of such serious threats and he reiterated his denial of the allegations made by the army's II division Commander Harold Bedoya Pizarro and V Brigade Commander Ricardo Emilio Cifuentes Ordóñez that CREDHOS served as an aide to the guerrillas.

Dr. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo is a lawyer and the founder and President of CREDHOS. He was obliged to leave Colombia in August 1991 following repeated threats against his life and returned only days before his personal assistant, Blanca Valero, was killed. That year he received the 1991 Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award for his work at CREDHOS from the Institute of Political Studies in Washington, United States.

Another disturbing development in recent weeks has been an apparently systematic attempt to discredit leading human rights organizations through misrepresentation of their

activities in some of the country's media; extensive reports carried by national newspapers, television and radio have linked respected human rights organizations and leading human rights defenders to guerrilla organizations. Although the reports have appeared under the by-line of "special investigative units", according to inquiries made by the local human rights groups the reports are believed to have been based on information provided by senior military commanders.

The Colombian government has condemned the attacks on CREDHOS members and has promised full investigations. However, those responsible have not yet been brought identified and brought to justice. AI is concerned that recent accusations by military commanders and sectors of the national media linking CREDHOS and other human rights organizations to guerrilla organizations could put their safety at risk and may provoke further attacks against them.