
RI BULLETIN

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Colombia: Rural Peace Communities under Renewed Threat from Armed Actors

The past two months in Colombia have been characterized by increased threats by both the paramilitary and the left wing guerilla against members of peace communities and the human rights advocates who defend them. Members of the Afro-Colombian peace communities of Nueva Vida and Esperanza en Dios located along the River Atrato in Choco, who welcomed Refugees International into their area in February, reported incursions of paramilitary at the entrance of their land in the Cacarica River Basin on April 10th. Members of a Colombian human rights organization were abducted by the members of the left-wing guerilla movement, the FARC, while carrying out work with peace communities in early April. They were released after a few days.

On February 21st, eight members of the peace community of San Jose de Apartado in Uraba, including their leader, Luis Eduardo Guerra, were murdered near their homes. Eyewitness accounts implicate the XIth Colombian Army Brigade, while the government of Colombia is blaming the FARC. A full and impartial investigation is required to determine the perpetrators of the massacre.

Colombia has been experiencing an internal armed conflict for at least the past twenty years. With over thirty thousand deaths, and displacement figures of between two and three million persons, the internal strife in Colombia has caused the highest level of displacement in the Western Hemisphere. Through its "democratic security policy," the current Colombian government is striving to end the conflict by demobilizing the right wing paramilitary forces while intensifying the military's engagement with the left wing guerilla, in particular the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The government of Colombia, in particular the Ministry responsible for the registration of the displaced in Colombia, the Social Solidarity Network, and recognized national human rights institutions, such as CODHES, dispute whether there has been an increase or decline in the annual percentage of displaced persons since the advent of this new policy. But all agree that more rural Colombians are displaced by the conflict every year.

Afro-Colombian peace communities in the Choco region of Colombia are attempting to rebuild their lives on collectively owned agricultural land in the lower section of the Atrato River, known as Cacarica. Although their land is located in areas accessible to all sides in the conflict, and in some parts occupied by illegal armed actors, including paramilitary and guerilla forces, the communities have developed ways to remain neutral and independent of the various armed actors, including the Colombian military.

The reasons the community emphasizes neutrality and autonomy from the Colombian military are in part historic and in part due to practical considerations for maintaining their own safety in a zone which remains contested by all of the armed actors. In February 1997 the communities were displaced from their home villages following a counterinsurgency operation conducted between the XVII Carepa Brigade of the Colombian army and various paramilitary units. As previously reported by RI, a villager recounted the

events there as follows: “The community leaders were gathered and the commander said we had three days to leave our houses since they needed to look for the guerilla. Then helicopters came dropping bombs and shooting. Our houses were looted and more than 80 people died. We all fled, some using boats to reach Turbo, the nearest large town accessible only by river; others escaped by land seeking sanctuary in the mountains or crossing into Panama.”

Then President Samper of Colombia later acknowledged the role of the Colombian military in forcing the communities from the Cacarica area. Measures were agreed with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights to ensure that the community would be able to return to their land under conditions which would enhance the safety and protection of the civilian population. In particular it was agreed that the community’s collective title to the land would be enforced, projects, such as the rebuilding of homes on collective land, would be initiated for rural development, protection would be enhanced, not by military presence, which the community believes creates counterattacks, but instead through the presence of civilian authorities who can activate an Early Warning System in the event of external threats, and reparation for damages.

Strong leadership in the community enabled them to recruit additional support and protection through the presence of national and international human rights observers. This added presence within the communities helped to ensure that the terms of the agreements with the Colombian government would be met, that the community had witnesses to incursions by armed actors, and that the observers could advocate on their behalf if the rights of the community were violated.

The response of senior Colombian government officials, including by President Uribe, to recent threats against the peace community of San Jose de Apartado has been problematic. Instead of acknowledging the valiant steps the community has taken to return to their lands in the midst of conflict and to live as civilians within the protection granted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, they have accused members of the community of being collaborators with the FARC.

Refugees International continues to urge the government to respect the neutrality of civilians in the midst of conflict. They must understand that the reason the community has demanded that armed actors remain outside their areas of habitation is, in the words of the Court “... because the personal and armed protection of these people may endanger the principles of collective neutrality and humanitarian area that inform their own existence and generate violent responses by the armed actors in the region.”

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- The Government of Colombia respect the provisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights regarding commitments to the neutrality of civilians living within peace communities;
- The Government of Colombia initiate full and impartial investigations into the San Jose de Apartado murders and the recent incursions and violations against community members and human rights observers;
- The Government of Colombia, the United States Government, and other States call upon the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia to carry out an investigation of the San Jose de Apartado murders;
- The U.S. Secretary of State withhold certification for Plan Colombia funds until a full and impartial investigation has been carried out to determine whether the XIth Brigade of the Colombian army was responsible for the murders in San Jose de Apartado and, if so, that measures will be taken to ensure justice;
- With the U.S. Plan Colombia policy up for renewal, the U.S. and Colombia adopt a new policy which emphasizes a negotiated end to the armed conflict in the country, greater protection for civilians, and a reallocation of resources towards humanitarian assistance, peace building and demobilization programs.

Refugees International Human Rights Advocate Mamie Mutchler visited Colombia in February.