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Threats and attacks against civil society suggest paramilitary networks remain intact

The demobilization of the Colombian paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) is supposedly complete. Over 30,000 soldiers have gone through formal ceremonies, handed in weapons, and had their identities documented.

Over the past two decades, members of this paramilitary group have orchestrated numerous attacks against human rights defenders, social movement leaders, and members of the political opposition. They have massacred, selectively assassinated, threatened, harassed and displaced countless unarmed civilians and brave social leaders who are attempting to build a more just society.

These grave human rights abuses continue in Colombia, despite the paramilitary demobilization. According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, **during the first four years of Álvaro Uribe's presidency over 11,000 individuals were killed or disappeared for political reasons, an average of 7 people PER DAY.**¹ (Translating this number to the U.S. context in terms of average deaths per 1,000 people, this would be the equivalent to roughly 48 people a day killed for political reasons. Compared to the number of U.S. soldiers killed so far in Iraq, the death toll from political violence during the Uribe Administration in Colombia is FOUR TIMES HIGHER.)

Since early 2006, a string of attacks and threats have been organized against numerous civil society groups in Colombia. Those responsible for these attacks are ex-combatants from paramilitary groups who identify themselves as "the third generation" or "the new generation" of paramilitary forces. This has included:

- Numerous email message death threats sent to the headquarters of dozens of civil society organizations. These messages insist that organizations that work for peace and justice in Colombia desist from their political activities – and in some cases that they leave the country – or "suffer the consequences". Messages are signed by groups claiming to have had connections to the AUC, and stating that they have the continued support of the Colombian security forces. Emails were received by rights groups on May 8, May 17, May 24, August 9, and again on September 15. **The last email threat is of particular concern, as it specifically states that these re-armed groups will enter the cities and begin to carry out their death threats beginning on September 22nd, 2006.**
- A number of break-ins to offices of non-governmental organizations and robberies of their computers, information, and other items related to their work. This has caused grave damages, particularly to those organizations that are working to document the full extent of human rights abuses and the humanitarian crisis in Colombia.
- Threats against journalists, university professors and students, and union leaders, several signed by the "Armed Wing of the Ex-AUC."
- Continued harassment against organizations working with victims of the political violence and with internally displaced populations. These groups have received threats and have been followed by unknown men. Such threats come from groups claiming to be reorganized AUC combatants.

Members of Congress should be highly concerned about these reports, as they clearly show that:

1. **Paramilitary groups in Colombia are continuing to operate, despite their demobilization.** They remain engaged in political violence and continue to threaten members of civil society working to ensure democracy and the rule of law. The content of these threats suggest that those reorganizing are not just common criminals, but rather they are groups with political agendas who aim to eliminate opposition using their well developed networks that have been allowed to remain in place post-demobilization.
2. **These groups continue to declare that they operate in collaboration with State security forces.** Given their long history of direct and indirect collaboration, this is a believable claim. For example, the September 15th

email threats to 8 Colombian civil society organizations stated: "It will not be easy for you to escape us given the unrestricted support that the military, the National Police and the state intelligence agencies are offering us."²

These groups must not be allowed to reorganize and **Members of Congress should insist that the conditions in place on U.S. assistance to this process be met by the Colombian government.** The Washington Office on Latin America and U.S. Office on Colombia request that Members of Congress:

1. **Call the Department of State** to let them know you are monitoring the paramilitary demobilization process in Colombia, and express your concern regarding the re-armament of these groups and their continued threats against human rights defenders.
2. **Express these concerns in meetings with the new Colombian Ambassador Carolina Barco and other Colombian officials** when they visit the Hill. In particular, Colombian officials should be urged to increase their political will in combating impunity and implementing the rule of law when it comes to all forms of attacks against human rights defenders by investigating, prosecuting and arresting those responsible for these actions.

For more information contact:

Heather Hanson,
Executive Director
U.S. Office on Colombia
202-232-8090

Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli,
Senior Associate for Colombia
Washington Office on Latin America
202-797-2171

1. "More than 750 people were presumed assassinated by State Agents in Colombia during the first four years of the current government," Colombian Commission of Jurists, Press Release, Bogotá, September 20, 2006.

2. "Seventh electronic threat to social organizations," José Alvear Restepo Lawyers Collective, Press Release, Bogotá, September 19, 2006.