

LIVING IN FEAR

The situation of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia

Front Line, January 2008

1. Introduction

This document provides an overview of the situation in which human rights defenders live and work in Colombia. A human rights defender is a person who works, non-violently, for any or all of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Specifically, this document examines the dangers human rights defenders face, and analyses the extent to which the state complies with the requirements defined in the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, namely to:

'Take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate defence of human rights'.¹

This paper has been written on the basis of information compiled by Front Line during a field visit to Colombia, which took place from 22 October to 2 November 2007 and includes follow-up information until the end of 2007. The field mission focused on three main locations in Colombia: Bogotá, Medellín and Barrancabermeja. The primary aim of the visit was to receive first-hand information from human rights defenders (HRDs) regarding their situation. In addition to interviews with human rights defenders, Front Line delegates also met with representatives of the Colombian government as well as representatives of the UN and European embassies.

The over-all picture is that the legitimate and peaceful defence of human rights is severely curtailed by killings, attacks, threats, legal harassment and smear campaigns. Protective measures put in place by the Colombian authorities can only partly address this situation, which to a large measure arises from policies of the government itself. The situation continues to require the highest priority in international relations with Colombia.

2. Threats and killings

Tens of thousands of people have been arbitrarily killed in Colombia for political reasons over the past decades. Fear of attack, threats and coercion has resulted in several million people being displaced.

Many hundreds of those killed were people involved in human rights work, whether documenting, analysing or publicizing human rights abuses, or leading peaceful activities in an attempt to correct or prevent such abuse. Many others have had to flee inside the country, or go into exile. Local human rights committees in some parts of Colombia have been extinguished. Trade union activity has become impossible in many places².

¹ See text of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/defenders/declaration.htm>

² The main oil workers Union, USO, can for security reasons only operate in urban zones, even though many of the oil workers are rural-based (interview at USO headquarters in Barrancabermeja, 30 October 2007)

For example, Barranquilla, the fourth city of Colombia with over 1 million inhabitants, once counted seven human rights organisations. Today, barely one is surviving: the local chapter of the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee, which leads a perilous existence - it was closed because of threats from September 2006 till February 2007.³ Another example are the fifty members of the Permanent Committee for Human Rights who have been murdered since its inception 28 years ago. The most recent killings took place in Cucuta in 2004 and Arauca in 2006. Two members also disappeared in Buga in 2006. Many have had to flee or escape into exile and similar cases have continued to occur this year.⁴

From 2002 through to 2006, the Colombian Commission of Jurists estimated that 52 human rights defenders were killed, and eight forced disappearances.⁵ The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders recorded 142 separate incidents of human rights defenders assassinated during this period, as well as the deaths of 26 members of their families.⁶ The difference between the figures is due to differences in criteria and the use of sources. However, the full picture is worse than these statistics, there are more cases of killings, which can be attributed to the human rights activism of the persons involved. For example, the killing of Julián Hurtado, a student in Cali, on 4 October 2006. He was a student activist who had been involved in a truth committee on the killing of another student, Johny Silva, in September 2005. Johny had been shot during a demonstration at the university by anti-riot police, according to witnesses. Julián had received threats before he was killed.⁷

Trade unionists are a category not consistently included in human rights defenders statistics. From 2002 to 2006, 138 trade union leaders were killed.⁸ A lot of trade union activity in Colombia concerns the defence of basic labour rights as laid down in International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions.

Killings of judges and personnel of the public ministry are also not included in the aforementioned statistics. However, in many cases the murder of such professionals is likely to be related to their human rights activities. The Colombian Judges Solidarity Fund keeps its own statistics, which they say are incomplete and probably only cover half the total figure.⁹ They registered nine killings in 2006, one attempted murder, one disappearance and one kidnapping.

³ Interview at CSPP headquarters in Bogotá, 25 October 2007

⁴ Interview at CPDH headquarters in Bogotá, 24 October 2007. At the time of the interview, José Gómez from Barranquilla was staying in Bogotá, looking for the means to leave the country because of continuing threats.

⁵ Statistics from CCJ database

⁶ Report *Las Tinieblas de la Impunidad: Muerte y Persecución a los Defensores de Derechos Humanos*, July 2007

⁷ Interview with Asociación Colombiana de Estudiantes Universitarios representatives in Bogotá, 23 October 2007

⁸ Page 70 of the report *2.515 o ese siniestra facilidad para olvidar*, by the Escuela Nacional Sindical, http://www.ens.org.co/aa/img_upload/45bdec76fa6b8848acf029430d10bb5a/cuaderno_19.pdf

⁹ Interview with ASONAL and FASOL representatives, Bogotá, 24 October 2007

So-called paramilitary groups, illegal entities using large-scale violence purportedly in support of the state in fighting subversion, are responsible for most of the killings.¹⁰ In the overwhelming majority of abuses against human rights defenders, nobody has been brought to trial. High impunity levels are a general phenomenon in Colombia, affecting not just human rights defenders' cases. However, impunity is not inevitable. If political will is there, a lot can be achieved, as is shown by the effort started in 2007 to speed up trials in cases of abuses against trade unionists.¹¹

The available data show a decrease in the number of killings of human rights defenders in recent years, in parallel with the process of demobilisation of paramilitary groups that has taken place since 2002. Paramilitary activity however has not disappeared¹² and neither have killings and threats against human rights defenders. Paramilitary groups pursue the same methods of persecution they had previously adopted, often using names such as Black Eagles and New Generation. In the popular neighbourhoods of Medellín, the continued intimidating and crime-linked presence of paramilitary, is reportedly acquiesced by the police.¹³ Community leader Judith Vergara was killed 23 April 2007; lawyer Víctor Hugo Gallego disappeared on 31 of December 2007. They both worked for the neighbourhood development NGO Corpades, that had been reporting threats.¹⁴ In Barrancabermeja, Yolanda Becerra, President of the Popular Women's Organisation, was referred to as an "enemy of the peace process" by a former paramilitary commander. Her

¹⁰ Figures from CCJ database. Amnesty International's assessment of the authors of the killings in its latest report on human rights defenders is that 'The vast majority of threats and attacks are allegedly committed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies, but Amnesty International has also received some reports of abuses committed by members of the guerrilla'. (*Colombia - Fear and intimidation: the dangers of human rights work*, 7 September 2006)

¹¹ As reported in El Tiempo newspaper, 23 October 2007, a special unit of public attorneys and judges was established in August 2007 to take up the huge backlog of cases, built up from previous years. By the end of October, in nine killings sentences had been issued, and a further 16 had almost come to the decision-making stage. In this case, political will apparently was brought about by economic considerations. The special effort arose out of an agreement with the International Labour Organisation in 2006, where the high number of assassinations of trade unionists in Colombia had been a concern for many years. The government did little to implement the agreement, until in 2007 it became clear that the persecution of trade unionists was an obstacle to the approval of the Free Trade Agreement between the USA and Colombia

¹² The design of the demobilisation process, the conditions attached to it, the way it is conducted and the effectiveness of the demobilisation are subject of a lot of controversy. The Constitutional and the Supreme Courts have ruled parts of the central piece of legislation pertaining to this demobilisation, law 975 of 2005, inadmissible. The mechanisms of the law to guarantee the entitlement of victims of human rights abuse to truth and reparation, to end impunity and to prevent repetition of transgressions of human rights have been heavily criticized the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (see e.g. *Intervención en el III Encuentro Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado*, 6 July 2006, <http://www.hchr.org.co/publico/pronunciamientos/ponencias/ponencias.php3?cod=84&cat=24>)

¹³ Interviews with NGO workers in Medellín's north eastern neighbourhoods, 26 October 2007

¹⁴ After the killing of Judith Vergara, Corpades director Luis Fernando Quijano reportedly stated: "The paramilitary have accused us of giving reports to Amnesty International about the grave situation of Medellín, that is why I consider them to be behind this grave killing" (http://www.ipc.org.co/page/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=921&Itemid=368). The killing of Judith Vergara occurred only three weeks after the Medellín municipal authorities had declared unfounded a warning by the Ombudsman's Office about the threat of attacks on the life of community leaders (http://www.ipc.org.co/page/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=923&Itemid=368). About the killing of Victor Hugo Gallego, see <http://www.movimientodevictimas.org/node/540>

organisation (and other human rights organisations in Barrancabermeja) as well as Becerra personally received a number of written threats.¹⁵ On 4 November, Becerra's apartment was broken into by two armed men who vandalised her home, tried to steal her computer and threatened to "terminate her family" if she did not leave.

The demobilisation process has also created new arenas and causes for the persecution of human rights defenders. The demobilisation law requires that paramilitaries who wish to benefit from reductions in penalties confess crimes they have committed. The special hearings, which started in 2006, have led not only to confessions, but also to new threats against victims and their lawyers, as evidenced by a number of cases which were followed by assassinations. NGOs counted 19 such assassinations between January and September 2007.¹⁶

Many of these killings are linked to the struggle for the return of land to people who have been displaced by paramilitary violence. For example, Yolanda Izquierdo from Montería was killed on the 31 January 2007 after having received serious threats and having been refused protection by a series of state institutions, even up until half an hour before her murder at the hands of a gunman.¹⁷ She had filed formal complaints against land grabbing on behalf of hundreds of displaced persons in Córdoba department. As similar initiatives are developing in several places across the country, NGOs working for victims' rights anticipate serious danger for those working in this area.¹⁸

A further example of this trend are the severe threats made against the Bogotá-based Yira Castro Lawyers Collective, which works on behalf of displaced persons and with communities who are resisting displacement. Clients of the Yira Castro Lawyers Collective have observed members of the paramilitary from their native regions loitering in close proximity to their offices over the last number of years. In 2006, Yira Castro lawyer Irene López was detained several times by intelligence personnel allegedly due to an arrest warrant, the existence of which could not be confirmed. In June 2007, all the computer equipment with electronic information was stolen from the office. Several witnesses observed people in four-wheel drive vehicles with polarised windows taking pictures during this period. In September, armed men entered the office building asking for 'that woman lawyer', and in October, Irene López received a note at her home, which read 'You are going to die on the 24th of December'.¹⁹ Irene went into exile for a short period following this.

It is not only the victims of paramilitary crimes and their representatives who work to obtain truth and reparations for victims who are at risk. Those who have a role in exposing paramilitary crimes and the power structures which support the paramilitaries are also under increasing pressure; specifically members of the judiciary and journalists.

¹⁵ Information from letter by Yolanda Becerra to Vice-President Francisco Santos, 22 October 2007

¹⁶ Letter from Colombian NGOs to Louise Arbour, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 8 September 2007; on 25 July, El Tiempo newspaper had quoted a CNRR figure of at least 15 dead and 200 threats; the CNRR is the body which oversees the reconciliation and reparation efforts that follow from law 975

¹⁷ Report by Alvaro Sierra in El Tiempo 7 February 2007, http://www.eltiempo.com/participacion/blogs/default/un_articulo.php?id_blog=3429041&id_recurso=3429441

¹⁸ Interviews at IPC, Medellín, 27 October 2007, and with MOVICE, Bogotá, 29 October 2007

¹⁹ Information from interview at Yira Castro offices in Bogotá, 29 October 2007

Journalists who attended the Law 975 hearings have been followed by unidentified persons who persisted in photographing them.²⁰ Investigative journalist Gonzalo Guillén has been receiving death threats since he documented the alleged links between the president's family and drug traffickers. Guillén decided to leave the country for a couple of weeks after the President himself mentioned him in October, but has since been receiving new threats both over the phone and by e-mail, which make it clear that he is being followed.²¹

Meanwhile, the internal armed conflict is continuing, providing a backdrop to major human rights abuse. In recent years, the remotest regions of the country have increasingly become afflicted by the conflict. This has led to a high exposure to human rights abuse of the many indigenous and communities of afro-descent who live in these areas. This abuse is committed by all parties in the conflict, the illegal armed opposition as well as its adversaries, such as the armed forces and illegal paramilitary groups. Among the zones particularly affected at the moment are the western Andes slopes and the Pacific coastal areas of Cauca and Nariño departments. The Black Communities Process reports illegal armed groups and the armed forces putting pressure on the communities in these areas to cultivate cash crops of their choice, either coca or oil palm.²² The entire leadership of the Network of Community Councils of the South Pacific (RECOMPAS) and of the Council of Black Communities of the Western Mountain Range of Nariño (COPDICONC) are under threat, and most have been forced to leave the zone.²³ Often entire communities have had to leave. Here, as in other parts of the country, pressure for displacement is reported to be strongest in zones in which plans exist for large-scale agriculture, or concessions for the extraction of minerals are in the process of being granted. After displacement, it becomes easier for large landowners or companies to implement these projects.

3. Protection Programmes

During the last ten years, a state protection programme for persons under threat has been in existence, run by the Ministry of Interior and Justice. The programme initially focused on human rights defenders and trade unionists and has gradually widened to include other sectors under threat, including journalists, members of the UP political party, members of departmental assemblies and of municipal councils, mayors and local people's defenders.²⁴ The budget for the programme thus increased sharply, and in 2007 stood at approximately US \$ 40 million. The programme utilises both preventative and 'hard' and 'soft' protection measures. These include the provision of mobile telecommunication devices, armoured cars, doors and windows, and assistance in national and international transport. The assistance is based on a risk assessment and is overseen by committees, which include the participation from the respective sectors covered by the programme.

²⁰ Interview with Colombian journalists' organisations, 25 October 2007 in Bogotá

²¹ Report about threats at <http://www.ipys.org/detalle.php?idioma=C&id=889>

²² Interview at Proceso de Comunidades Negras offices in Bogotá, 24 October 2007

²³ Interview with NOMADESC representative in Bogotá, 23 October 2007, and at Proceso de Comunidades Negras offices in Bogotá, 24 October 2007

²⁴ See http://www.nuevoarcoiris.org.co/local/dec2816_2006.doc for the decree currently governing the Protection Programme

The programme has no doubt saved the lives of human rights defenders and has been of help in enabling them to continue their work. However in many cases defenders have wanted the programme to act with greater speed and efficacy in providing protection measures. For example, physical protection measures at an NGO office in Bogotá were only put in place three years after the NGO had moved in, when the lack of security drew the attention of a number of ambassadors who then alerted their contacts in the Colombian government. In another case, protection measures which were needed at an NGO office could not be put in place because the NGO did not have a rental agreement for a period of two years or longer. In another case, a HRD had moved to Bogotá to escape the dangers in his hometown. He wanted to receive protection to be able to move back, but the programme only provided for a risk assessment and corresponding protection measures in his new place of residence. The programme is reluctant to provide satellite phones, even though these are often the only means of communication in rural areas. Limitations on the use of cars can impose unreasonable limits on the freedom of movement of participants in the programme.²⁵

Many HRDs are reluctant to engage with all elements of the programme, in particular the use of armoured vehicles. This is due to the fact that such vehicles generally come with drivers from the state Administrative Security Department, and information from this body has been leaked to paramilitary groups.²⁶ It is also feared that telecommunications equipment is being used to track the movements of HRDs.²⁷

Some HRDs do not want to use the programme at all. In addition to the fears regarding monitoring through the programme, HRDs also cite principled reasons: rather than half-heartedly dabbling in limiting the effects of threats, the government should instead tackle the root causes of crimes against human rights defenders, including the involvement of state agencies.

Due to the limitations of the official protection programme, a Non-Governmental Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders has been maintained.²⁸ It provides training on self-protection, and arranges and facilitates travel and temporary stays inside and outside the country. A number of other organisations also run mechanisms to enable movement inside and outside the country. However not all urgent needs can be dealt with by these programmes.

Among the NGO-run mechanisms, the direct physical protection provided by Peace Brigades International is unique, and is crucial in enabling a key group of human rights defenders to operate.²⁹

²⁵ Examples drawn from various interviews in Bogotá, 24 and 25 October 2007

²⁶ A blatant example of cooperation between DAS and paramilitary group is the case of former DAS director Jorge Noguera is accused, he is under arrest in preparation for the trial against him (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6278000/6278988.stm). The latest Decree on the Protection Programme (http://www.nuevoarcoiris.org.co/local/dec2816_2006.doc) announces the phasing out of DAS involvement with the programme

²⁷ In one case, reportedly four journalists with a mobile phone were called from a military barracks with the callers asking 'who is the guerrilla operating this device?'

²⁸ See www.somosdefensores.org

²⁹ See <http://www.pbi-colombia.org/21.html>

The official state programme does not cover all categories of human rights defenders. Judges and public ministry officials have their own protection arrangements. Reportedly, these measures completely lack sufficient funding,³⁰ which is an extremely serious situation given the crucial role of these functionaries in protecting human rights. The Colombian Judges Solidarity Fund, an initiative of the Colombian Association of Judges and several other NGOs, endeavours to fill part of this gap.³¹ It offers support to judges or their family members in cases of killings, threats and other violations.

4. Stigmatisation

President Alvaro Uribe and other senior government officials have repeatedly made statements equating the work of the human rights defenders with guerrilla activity. For example when speaking to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights during its visit to Bogotá on October 17th 2007, the President stated: "Here, every time the guerrillas and members of their court feel they can be defeated, they take recourse in an appeal of violation of human rights".³² (This refers to human rights reporting in 2007 regarding an increase in extra-judicial executions by the armed forces.³³) Similar statements have been made by the Minister of Defence and the Interior and Justice Minister. On occasion, such statements have made direct references to prominent human rights organisations, such as the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers Collective, and the Colombian Commission of Jurists.

These statements link legitimate human rights work with illegal armed subversion. As a result, state security agents and paramilitary groups thus view human rights defenders as legitimate targets.

President Uribe has reportedly stated to foreign and international officials that he is not prepared to tone down such statements.³⁴ Government spokespeople state that the concern over these statements is unnecessary, and that the President's statements are often presented out of context.³⁵ While it is true that the President has on occasion also made positive statements regarding human rights work³⁶, as has the Vice-President,³⁷ a

³⁰ Interview with ASONAL and FASOL functionaries, Bogotá, 24 October 2007

³¹ FASOL started with 100% funding from the German Association of Judges; at the moment, most of the funding still comes from that source

³² From http://web.presidencia.gov.co/discursos/discursos2007/octubre/corte_171007.html

³³ Report *Ejecuciones extrajudiciales directamente atribuibles a la Fuerza Pública en Colombia, julio de 2006 a junio de 2007*, submitted by Colombian NGOs to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, 10 October 2007

³⁴ Interview at UN High Commissioner's Office in Bogotá, 1 November 2007

³⁵ Interview at the Presidential Programme on Human Rights, 2 November 2007

³⁶ In a statement on 8 March 2007, Uribe said: "Women and men human rights defenders are a vital part of the democratic life, because of their valor and experience helping the construction of a free and independent society in which all citizens can exercise their civil and political rights, free from threats and coercion" (http://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa_new/sne/2007/marzo/08/01082007.htm)

³⁷ Quote from Vice-President Santos, during the visit of UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, 9 September 2007, <http://www.cancilleria.gov.co/WebContentManager/webapp/display.jsp?sid=281474976713867&pi>

clear and unequivocal message has not been put forward yet by the current Colombian government.³⁸

5. Harassment by judicial and security bodies

Human rights defenders report that they are increasingly subjected to unfounded and often arbitrarily conducted legal proceedings. Colombian legal procedures allow for long periods of pre-trial detention, and in situations where a HRD is not detained, engagement in legal procedures takes substantial time and energy.

In order to initiate proceedings against human rights defenders, the Public Ministry has been shown to utilise information, which clearly would not stand up in court.³⁹ The Ministry does not operate with equal impartiality in all parts of the country, as was recognized by the national Attorney General himself in the case of Iván Cepeda. Cepeda, leader of the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, was being investigated on charges of slander as he had openly denounced the links between politicians and the paramilitary. The investigation began in the department of Sucre, where the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes has been subject to killings and threats without the state taking swift and effective action countering these.⁴⁰ In this climate, a biased procedure against Cepeda was to be expected. After pressure from the US Congress the national Attorney General transferred the case to Bogotá, where an impartial procedure was considered more likely.⁴¹

In many cases, the information used against human rights defenders consists of unsubstantiated statements from guerrilla defectors and from intelligence reports which claim to demonstrate the involvement of human rights defenders in guerrilla movements. For example, on 29 September 2007, four leaders of the Cimitarra River Valley Peasants' Association (ACVC) were detained. This organisation runs economic and social development projects in the rural areas northwest of Barrancabermeja. Detention orders were also issued against other members of the association leadership. This occurred following a series of protests against numerous army killings in the area over recent years by the Association, including a protest march to Barrancabermeja in June.

The Association is accused of having been created by the FARC guerrillas in order to both discredit the armed forces by denouncing human rights violations, and to channel European Union development funding to the guerrillas. Similar accusations had been

[d=16078](#) said human rights defenders' organisations make a "valuable contribution to the goal of making human rights valid in Colombia. I reiterate the will of the national Government to grant them all guarantees for the exercise of their work in Colombia. I condemn hostile actions against these organisations reflected in threats and office break-ins...."

³⁸ Previous governments for example, issued official decrees about the importance of civil society human rights work, instructing state agencies to support and protect this work; see in particular Presidential Directive 07 of 1999 (<http://www.derechoshumanos.gov.co/modules.php?name=informacion&file=article&sid=129>)

³⁹ See *Colombia's Human Rights Defenders in Danger*, Human Rights First, September 2007, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.info/pdf/07906-hrd-colombia-white-paper.pdf>

⁴⁰ See *Lista de Extermínio de Líderes de este Movimiento en los Departamentos de Sucre y Bolívar*, 1 November 2006, <http://www.movimientodevictimas.org/node/235>

⁴¹ Interview with Iván Cepeda, 29 October 2007, Bogotá; see also note *Colombia's Human Rights Defenders in Danger*, Human Rights First, September 2007

made in 2003 but the case had been shelved in 2005. In the revived investigation, in addition to information given by former guerrilla members, declarations made under threat by a detained association leader in 2005 are being used by the Public Ministry.⁴² A police captain from Barrancabermeja reportedly stated that "what has happened to ACVC will happen to many organisations in Barranca".⁴³

Apart from obtaining information from former guerrilla fighters, intelligence is also gathered by shadowing HRDs' movements, tapping telephones and photography. Armed state personnel stage incursions at almost every training meeting of the non-governmental protection programme. Law students who are accepted as interns at the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers Collective find that their phones suddenly start to function poorly. Persons observed shadowing defenders in the streets or taking pictures of participants at meetings have sometimes been traced and revealed to be members of the Administrative Security Department.⁴⁴

6. Theft of electronic information

In 2006 and 2007, the theft of electronically stored information from the offices, and sometimes the residences, of human rights defenders has become a common occurrence.⁴⁵ In some cases, entire computers were stolen, and in some cases the hard disks were removed.

Human rights organisations have deplored the lax attitude of the authorities towards such thefts. The human rights organisations have requested that the office of the Attorney General re-classify individual cases of robbery and bring them together to be dealt with by the specialized Human Rights Unit.

7. Role of international community

International support is crucial to Colombian human rights defenders.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has developed a good relationship with human rights defenders. The Office in its public statements makes clear the value it attaches to the work of human rights NGOs. Its observations often reflect the same concerns NGOs put forward. The practice of joint visits with NGOs to remote regions has been found to be very useful. Problems that NGOs encounter in their work are taken up by the OHCHR with the government, for example with the Protection Programme.

⁴² Information from interviews with Humanidad Vigente collective, 29 October 2007 in Bogotá, and with ACVC directives, Barrancabermeja and Puerto Matilde, 30 and 31 October 2007

⁴³ Interview at one of the Barrancabermeja human rights organisations, 30 October 2007; ACVC is the acronym for the Cimitarra River Valley Peasants' Association

⁴⁴ Information from several interviews in Bogotá, October 2007

⁴⁵ It was referred to in a number of interviews during the Front Line visit with interviewees often naming cases which were not mentioned by others; the total number of thefts of computerized information is not known to anyone but over the last couple of years it definitely is a two digit figure

The system of precautionary measures of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission entails requests to states to take steps to prevent human rights abuse. The commission has issued many measures on behalf of Colombian human rights defenders. Most of the implementation of the precautionary measures in Colombia is done through the Protection Programme.

Diplomatic representatives from Europe and North America in general support the work of human rights defenders. Concerns about the working conditions of human rights defenders are being transferred through diplomatic channels to the Colombian government. However, the generally supportive attitude to the paramilitary demobilisation process should be accompanied by clear, visible and unequivocal support for the rights of victims to truth and reparation. Support for the demobilisation process should be conditioned on the participants in the process not continuing threats against survivors of human rights abuse and their representatives. Concerns and recommendations of international human rights bodies such as the Office of the High Commissioner and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission should be unequivocally supported.

Given the development of new obstacles to the work of human rights defenders, countering the problem of legal harassment should attain highest priority. The EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders mandate the observation of legal proceedings against human rights defenders.

8. Recommendations

Front Line concludes it is urgent for the Colombian authorities to improve and strengthen the protection of human rights defenders in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and other international human rights standards, and recommends the following concrete steps:

- (1) Take specific measures to fight impunity in cases of threats and attacks against, and killings of human rights defenders. Impartial, committed, well-resourced and well-protected investigators, attorneys and judges should work on bringing those responsible to justice;
- (2) Take action to prevent attempts by beneficiaries of the demobilisation process to intimidate, threaten or attack victims of human rights violations in their quest for truth, justice and reparation of victims of human rights violations;
- (3) Take action to prevent threats, intimidation and attacks by not fully demobilised paramilitary structures and investigate and bring to justice those responsible for such attacks;
- (4) Continue working on making the government Protection Programme for Human Rights Defenders more effective and less bureaucratic;
- (5) Desist from making public statements which question the legitimate work of human rights defenders, such as equating their work with support for guerrilla groups and in turn leading to direct threats made against them;
- (6) Issue a new government decree re-iterating past decrees stating that all public officials have the duty to contribute to ensuring protection for human rights defenders;

(7) Counter abuses of the criminal justice system which curtail the legitimate activities of human rights defenders. All cases of accusations against human rights defenders should be assigned to Bogotá-based, impartial public attorneys. State officials who engage in abuse of the criminal justice system should be investigated and disciplined.

(8) Take swift and effective steps to investigate the systematic robbery of electronic information from the offices and homes of human rights defenders.