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Colombia: Killing of family members of leaders of the Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia amidst series of attacks and violence against the movement

On 22 September 2018, two relatives of members of the **Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia** were assassinated, one in the municipality of Briceño and the other in the municipality of Valdivia. These are the latest incidents in a series of attacks against the movement's members and their families.

[Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia \(MRVA\)](#) is a human rights movement composed of 15 associations and families in the West, North and Lower-Cauca sub-region in Antioquia, affected by the negative environmental and human rights impact of the hydroelectric project “Hidroituango”. The project under construction in the Cauca river is one of the largest embankment dams in Latin America. It is carried out by *Empresa Públicas de Medellín* (Public Enterprises of Medellín – EPM) and affects more than 26, 000 hectares of land in 19 municipalities in the region. The region in question has historically been affected by violence and armed conflict. For the past 10 years, MRVA has denounced the negative impacts of the “Hidroituango” project and as a result, its members and their families have suffered multiple violations of their rights, including death threats, smear campaigns, intimidation and killings.

At approximately 9:00 p.m. on 22 September 2018, 20-year-old Julián de Jesús Areiza Moreno was murdered. The killing occurred near the entrance of the village of Chirí in the municipality of Briceño. The place is located approximately 10 minutes by car from the El Valle de Toledo police station on the road that leads to the wall of the “Hidroituango” project. Julián was the nephew of Rubén Areiza, a human rights defender member of MRVA. Julián was coming back from a sport tournament and his assassins were waiting on the path. They shot when they saw that Julián would not stop at their call. Julián was taken off his motorcycle and killed with a shot in the head. Human rights defender Rubén Areiza called the police to ask for protection for him and his family to visit the crime scene. At first, the authorities refused to provide accompaniment, stating that they also feared the situation. The family and the human rights defender went to the site and remained by the victim's body for several hours until the police finally arrived, accompanied by the National Army.

During the same night, the son of Juan de Dios Ramírez was killed in Valdivia. Juan de Dios is a former member of the MRVA. He had recently presented his letter of resignation due to the pressure exercised against those linked to the movement. Several officials from the EPM company and local public administration had stated that those who are part of Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia would not receive any reparation or compensation for recent damages and losses caused by the project.

The overall situation has become increasingly dangerous for MRVA's members. Human rights defenders and their relatives have endured attacks, stigmatisation and persecution, including from high-level officials. Since September 2017, the movement reported five cases in which relatives of its

leaders were attacked. Strangers entered the house of Rito Mena, a human rights defender in Valdivia, and tried to attack his six-year-old daughter. Two relatives of woman human rights defender Cecilia Muriel were also murdered in Valdivia. In May 2018, two human rights defenders and two of their relatives were killed: [Hugo Albeiro George Pérez](#) was killed alongside his nephew, and [Luis Alberto Torres](#) and his brother were murdered.

Movimiento Rios Vivos Antioquia has raised concerns on numerous occasions at the lack of effective investigations by the Prosecutor's Office of the attacks against their members. One attack involved the Mayor of Valdivia firing shots against the house of a member of the movement. The Governor of Antioquia, who gave a number of public [statements](#) against the movement, threatened to forcefully evict communities from the municipal stadium. The communities were taken there by local authorities after being evacuated from their homes and workplaces by rescue agencies following a flood caused by complications of the “Hidroituango” construction works in April 2018. These communities have not received adequate support and reparations, and threats against those seeking justice have forced several social leaders to flee the area.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned about the wave of attacks against members of Movimientos Rios Vivos Antioquia and the pattern of attacks and killings against their family members. Front Line Defenders expresses further concern regarding the lack of proper investigation of the cases reported to the authorities, which effectively encourages the aggressors to continue these actions. Finally, Front Line Defenders condemns the smear campaigns and insults against MRVA by public officials; Front Line Defenders fears that such stigmatisation may lead to a further increase in violence against the movement.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Colombia to:

1. Strongly condemn the killings of members of Movimiento Rios Vivos Antioquia and their relatives;
2. Immediately take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the members of MRVA, in coordination with the human rights defenders concerned;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the assassinations and the multiple attacks on MRVA members, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
4. Refrain from stigmatising the work of human rights defenders, particularly the activities carried out by the leaders from the Movimiento Rios Vivos Antioquia;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Colombia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.