

Increase in Paramilitary Threats in Barrancabermeja

A message from Scott Nicholson:

Dear friends,

The threat of paramilitary attacks against human rights activists in the city of Barrancabermeja in Colombia has increased in the past week. On February 26, I received a message from William Mendoza, president of the Coca-Cola workers' union in Barrancabermeja. He wrote, "We're very worried, but we're continuing in the struggle. They've started calling my house again to threaten me, and Luz (William's wife) is very nervous. I tell you that I've never been more concerned, but as they say, 'It's better to die for something, than to die for nothing.'"

The union sent out an action alert on February 26 and I talked to William on February 28. There are reports that members of the Bloque Capital paramilitary group from Bogotá are present in Barrancabermeja. The commander of that group, alias "Botalon," is evidently in charge of carrying out the "Final Operation" to eliminate the leaders of the social justice organizations that still remain in the city. The target list includes Yolanda Becerra, director of the Low-Income Women's Organization (Organización Femenina Popular), that visited Montana in October 2001. William said that the paramilitaries of the Bloque Capital are experts in killing people that have body guards. The concern is that rather than selectively killing one of the social leaders, the paramilitaries will eliminate all of the leaders in one operation.

William and the union are requesting that messages be sent to Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos, who is in charge of the government's human rights program. At the end of this message is the e-mail address and fax number for the vice president, along with a suggested message in Spanish and the English translation of that message.

Please take a moment now to defend the lives of William, Yolanda, and the other social leaders in Barrancabermeja.

In solidarity,
Scott Nicholson
Community Action for Justice in the Americas (CAJA)

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Subject – Amenazas en Barrancabermeja (Threats in Barrancabermeja)

Fax - 011-57-1-565-7682 (011 is the international access code, 57 is the country code for Colombia, and 1 is the city code for Bogotá)

Dr. Francisco Santos
Vicepresidente de la República
Calle 7 No 6-54
Santa Fe de Bogotá

Colombia

Estimado Vicepresidente Santos,

Me dirijo a usted para expresar mi grave preocupación por las amenazas en contra de los dirigentes sociales y sindicales de Barrancabermeja. Según la información que he recibido, paramilitares del Bloque Capital se encuentran en la ciudad. El comandante de ellos, el alias Botalón, está a cargo de realizar la denominada “Operación Final” para asesinar a la dirigencia social y sindical de Barrancabermeja. La acción se iniciará con un listado de reconocidos dirigentes que suscribieron el Derecho de Petición que en el ejercicio del control público a la administración del señor alcalde Dr. Edgar Cote Gravino le hicieron llegar. Entre las personas que firman este documento se encuentran Juan Carlos Galvis, Presidente de la Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT); Yolanda Becerra, Directora de la Organización Femenina Popular (OFP); Pablo Arenales, Presidente de la Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS); David Ravelo, Miembro del Partido Comunista; Jorge Gamboa, Presidente de la Unión Sindical Obrera (USO); y Regulo Madero, Director de la Corporación Nación, entre otros.

No entiendo cómo es posible que en una ciudad tan militarizada como Barrancabermeja, los paramilitares han podido operar libremente desde diciembre de 2000. Le pido a usted que el gobierno colombiano tome todas las medidas necesarias para proteger a los dirigentes y miembros de las organizaciones sociales, sindicales, y políticas de Barrancabermeja. Voy a seguir muy de cerca a la situación allá.

En espero de su respuesta, me despido atentamente.

English translation

Dear Vice President Santos,

I'm writing to you to express my grave concern for the threats against the social and union leaders of Barrancabermeja. According to the information that I've received, paramilitaries from the Bloque Capital are in the city. Their commander, alias Botalón, is in charge of carrying out the “Final Operation” to kill the social and union leaders of Barrancabermeja. The action will start with a list of known leaders that signed the petition that was sent to the mayor, Dr. Edgar Cote Gravino, in their exercise of public control of the administration. The people that signed the petition included Juan Carlos Galvis, President of the Unified Workers Federation (CUT); Yolanda Becerra, Director of the Low-Income Women's Organization (OFP); Pablo Arenales, President of the Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS); David Ravelo, Member of the Communist Party; Jorge Gamboa, President of the Workers Labor Union (USO - petroleum workers union); and Regulo Madero, Director of the Nation Corporation (non-governmental organization); among others.

I don't understand how, in a city that is so militarized like Barrancabermeja, the paramilitaries have been able to freely operate since December 2000. I ask that the Colombian government take

all the necessary steps to protect the leaders and members of the social, union, and political organizations of Barrancabermeja. I will be following the situation there very closely.

I await your response.

Sincerely