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Venezuela

Response to Information Request Number:	VEN03001.ZMI
Date:	November 07, 2002
Subject:	Venezuela: Information on the Autodefensas Unidas de Venezuela (AUV)
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Venezuela / Paramilitary groups / Political violence / Protests / Social unrest

Query:

What is the Autodefensas Unidas de Venezuela (AUV) and where does it operate? Have new armed groups emerged in Venezuela since the April 2002 coup attempt?

Response:

On June 25, 2002, the existence of a group called the Autodefensas Unidas de Venezuela (AUV) was announced by the chief of the AUV's Fidel Castaño Front, Commander Antonio. The group operates in the states of Táchira, Apure, and Zulia. All three states are along the border with Colombia, specifically the Colombian departments of: Guajira, Cesar, Norte de Santander, Arauca, and Vichada (SEMANA 27 Jun 2002; EL TIEMPO 27 Jun 2002).

Various sources indicate that the AUV plans to target President Hugo Chávez, ex-Minister of Interior and Justice Ramón Rodríguez Chacon, and Rubén Zamora, Commander of the Colombian FARC's (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) 10th Front (BBC Jul 2002; Criscaut 27 Jun 2002; SEMANA 27 & 28 Jun 2002).

The Bolivarian Circles and the Deputy of Chávez's party (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR), Iris Varela, were added to the AUV's list of targets in July 2002 (BBC 4 Jul 2002).

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The AUV is reported to have over 2,000 members. The group also targets Colombian guerrillas present in Venezuela and opposes policies of the Chávez government that it considers to be narco-guerrilla in nature (SEMANA 27 Jun 2002).

Sources available to the Resource Information Center document one act of violence by the AUV in September with an increase in violent activity in October. The BBC reported that the AUV claimed responsibility for a grenade attack on the home of Deputy Iris Varela on 8 September 2002. No one was hurt in the attack. The BBC received information from the Venezuelan daily, EL NACIONAL (BBC Worldwide Monitoring 17 Sep 2002). The AUV also claimed responsibility for recent killings in the border state of Táchira. The body of one victim, Rafael Arnulfo Avila, age 23, was found in Chorro del Indio National Park located in the municipality of Andrés Bello in Táchira state. Mr. Avila was decapitated and his body showed signs of mutilation (Delgado 24 Oct 2002).

In a pamphlet dated October 18, 2002, the AUV announced a social cleansing campaign in Táchira province, with a concentration in the cities of San Cristóbal, San Antonio del Táchira, and Urena. The communique explains that these three cities were targeted because they "are besieged by guerrillas, drug trafficking, and common crime." According to the AUV, 'the pertinent state security authorities have not responded effectively to those criminal groups due to direct or indirect complicity or lack of training or support from their superiors or their institution' (Delgado 24 Oct 2002). The AUV also states that its mission is to protect the average citizens of the border region, from Venezuelan and Colombian leftist groups including the FARC, ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), and FBL (Frente Bolivariano de Liberación). In the October 18 pamphlet, the AUV claims that a senior official in the Chávez government has ordered that no actions be taken against these leftist groups (Delgado 24 Oct 2002).

In a July 1, 2002 interview with the Colombian daily EL TIEMPO, Carlos Castaño, leader of the Colombian paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense of Colombia, AUC), confirmed that the AUV had been trained by Colombian paramilitaries on Venezuelan territory. Castaño stated that, while the two paramilitary groups are in communication, they are independent of each other (Soto & Restrepo 27 Jun 2002).

Julio Montoya, president of the Committee on Foreign Policy of the National Assembly, believes that the presence of the AUV is due to the rise of the "Frente Bolivariano de Liberación," a Colombian-Venezuelan guerrilla organization. According to Rep. Montoya the Frente Bolivariano de Liberación operates in Guasdualito or the Alto Apure, with a presence in Táchira and Portuguesa (SEMANA 28 Jun 2002). Information on the Frente Bolivariano de Liberación will be provided in a future RIC Query response.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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