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Colombia

Response to Information Request Number:	COL02004.ZMI
Date:	May 10, 2002
Subject:	Colombia: Information on Threats to Evangelical Christians
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Colombia / Freedom of religion / Guerrillas / Paramilitary forces / Religious minorities / Religious persecution

Query:

To what extent are evangelical Christians threatened and targeted by any of the illegal armed groups in Colombia?

Response:

In predominantly Roman Catholic Colombia, about 3.5 percent of the population of about 42 million profess to be evangelical Christians, according to a poll commissioned by the EL TIEMPO newspaper in April 2001, and there are approximately 740 denominations. Evangelical Christians are regularly targeted by the country's two principal guerrilla groups, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), National Liberation Army, generally for political reasons. They are sometimes targeted by paramilitary groups, also for political reasons. Because of threats by guerrilla and paramilitary groups, many evangelical preachers are forced to refrain from publicly discussing the country's internal conflict. (DOS October 2001; Tamayo 24 Dec 2000).

The FARC has forced evangelical churches to pay a "war tax," a form of extortion the FARC regularly uses against businesses and middle and upper class individuals. In 2000 evangelical groups reported that in urban as well as rural areas pastors and churches were receiving threats that they would be killed if their congregations did not contribute a portion of their collections to guerrilla groups. (DOS Oct 2001; MacHarg 12 Jun 2000).

Reasonable Fear
Screenings
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According to the Fundación Cristianos por la Paz, Christians for Peace Foundation, made up of mostly Protestant pastors, at least 59 evangelical pastors were killed and 300 churches torched or closed by the FARC and ELN between 1998 and 2001. The FARC was believed to be responsible for a majority of the killings. In a September 2000 radio transmission, FARC military chief Jorge Briceño Suárez, alias El Mono Jojoy, stated that Protestant pastors are “enemies of the revolution...All should be killed.” According to the Movimiento Unión Cristiana (MUC), Christian Union Movement, an association of evangelical churches, guerrillas regularly extort and attack rural evangelical Christians and their churches, while the FARC alone had forced the closure of more than 300 evangelical churches by mid-2000, and another 120 by May 2001. The guerrilla groups tend to view evangelical churches as agents of U.S. interests since the larger among the denominations in Colombia are offshoots of U.S.-based churches. (Tamayo 4 Dec 2000; DOS Feb 2001; DOS Oct 2001; DOS Mar 2002).

In March 2002, the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá strongly warned North American evangelical missionaries and associated evangelical churches in rural Colombia of possible increased targeting by guerrilla groups following the breakdown in February of peace talks between the government and the FARC. The warning followed a political rally earlier in 2002 where right-wing presidential candidate Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who advocates a tough military response to left-wing insurgencies, addressed a large gathering sponsored by the International Charismatic Mission. After the rally, the FARC informed evangelical groups that evangelical pastors and churches would continue to be regarded as military targets because of their perceived political involvement (MacHarg 8 Mar 2002).

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.

References:

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