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Colombia

Response to Information Request Number:	COL03001.ZMI
Date:	January 08, 2003
Subject:	Colombia: Information on Specifically Targeted and Vulnerable Groups
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Colombia / Intellectuals / Teachers / Armed conflicts / Civilian persons / Clergy / Religious leaders / Catholic church / Protestant church / Refugees / Trade unions / Trade unionists / Internal migration / Journalists / Public servants / Health personnel / Indigenous peoples / Displaced persons / Kidnapping / Political violence / Paramilitary forces / Guerrilla warfare

Query:

How did political developments and trends in violence in Colombia in 2002 affect specifically targeted and vulnerable groups?

Response:

Levels of violence increased following the February 2002 collapse of peace talks between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Amnesty International stated in November 2002, "...the conflict has intensified and civilians are bearing the brunt of increasing levels of political violence. The FARC – as well as the armed forces and their paramilitary allies – are still failing to respect the right of civilians not to be drawn into the conflict." In December 2002 Amnesty International stated further that there was "a marked deterioration of the human rights crisis, and political killings, displacements and other violations of human rights and international humanitarian law continue unabated" (AI Nov 2002 ; AI Dec 2002).

**Reasonable Fear
Screenings**

Refugees

Humanitarian Parole

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Program)**

Human Rights Watch said in December 2002 that the “armed conflict has intensified over the past year...impunity for [paramilitaries] has become more, not less entrenched... guerrillas have escalated attacks on civilians” (HRW 23 Dec 2002).

In the wake of the failed peace negotiations, the FARC significantly expanded its armed activities into urban areas, while in response the paramilitaries continued to strengthen their own urban forces. Urban political violence surged particularly in Medellín; parts of Bogotá and Cali; in the Caribbean port cities and resort towns of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta; and in numerous mid-sized cities around the country such as Cúcuta, Bucaramanga and Pereira (Salazar 29 Dec 2002; Ferrer 3 Dec 2002; EL COLOMBIANO 17 Oct 2002; BOSTON GLOBE 3 Nov 2002; EL TIEMPO 19 Oct 2002).

After taking office on 7 August 2002, the government of President Álvaro Uribe implemented a series of new security and intensified counter-insurgency measures, including an Estado de Comoción Interior (State of Internal Commotion), under which civil liberties were substantially curtailed. Other measures that were begun included the training of 15,000 soldados campesinos (peasant soldiers) to be deployed in their home towns throughout the country, and the formation of a nationwide force of a million or more paid civilian spies and informers. In December 2002, Amnesty International and the Colombian Commission of Jurists repeated their concerns that such programs were already dragging civilians further into the conflict (Reuters 8 Nov 2002; HOUSTON CHRONICLE 14 Dec 2002; AI Dec 2002; Ferrer 9 Dec 2002).

In this overall climate, some specifically targeted and vulnerable groups continued to be at risk or faced heightened threats, including: 1) academics, intellectuals and teachers; 2) indigenous people; 3) journalists; 4) medical personnel; 5) municipal and other government officials; 6) religious figures; and 6) trade unionists. A more detailed examination of the threats to each of these groups is provided in a separate section below.

The numbers of people displaced by the conflict continued to increase on an annual basis in 2002. According to the Colombian Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES, Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement), the number of people forced to abandon their homes rose from 317,375 in 2000 to 341,925 in 2001, then to 353,120 in the first nine months of 2002 alone. CODHES also noted an increase in intra-urban displacement, with civilian populations forced by the rise in urban political violence to migrate within cities in search of safety. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in the first six months of 2002 there was an increase of almost 100 percent in the numbers of displaced from the same period the year before, with between 900 and 1,000 people displaced per day (CODHES 18 Nov 2002; Ferrer 23 Aug 2002; UNHCR 15 Oct 2002; UNHCR 13 Nov 2002).

There was little let-up in the kidnapping-for-ransom and extortion operations against civilians carried out by guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and common criminals. According to

the Fundación País Libre (Free Country Foundation), a Colombian non-governmental organization that monitors kidnapping and assists victims and their families, kidnappings occurred at a rate of 248.2 per month during the first eleven months of 2002. At that rate, the total was expected to be close to the 3,041 kidnappings recorded in 2001, as Colombia continued to be the world's leader in abductions, with more than two-thirds of the global total. The FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army), Colombia's second largest guerrilla group, continued to be the principal perpetrators, accounting for more than half of all abductions in the first eleven months of the year. About 14 percent were attributed to common criminals, who often act in league with or in the pay of guerrilla groups. Paramilitaries were responsible for about 6 percent. Business people, professionals and children continued to be the primary kidnapping targets. Other groups that continued to be targeted included government functionaries, public and private sector employees, commercial and private vehicle drivers and ranchers (Fundación País Libre Dec 2002).

Guerrilla groups also continued to target political figures and elected officials for kidnapping. As of fall 2002, the FARC held dozens of politicians, including five members of congress, former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, the governor of Antioquia department and numerous elected officials at the departmental level, including twelve legislators abducted en masse in Cali, the capital of Valle del Cauca department, in April 2002. The FARC continued to demand the release of jailed FARC members in exchange for the release of these high-profile hostages (Reuters 17 Oct 2002; Toro 13 Sep 2002).

The FARC in 2002 also increased its use of bombing attacks - in addition to the threat of kidnapping - as part of its extortion operations against Colombian business people and professionals. In December for example, authorities held the FARC responsible for bomb blasts at a lottery ticket business in Bogotá and at hotels in the Caribbean coastal city of Santa Marta, and linked the attacks to extortion schemes (MIAMI HERALD 25 Dec 2002; EL TIEMPO 28 Dec 2002).

At the end of 2002, few Colombian analysts were optimistic about the chances of bringing down the levels of violence and some expected the situation to worsen as the Uribe government, the FARC and the ELN hardened their respective positions. The FARC rejected the government's insistence that any dialogue be handled through the United Nations and called for the formation of a parallel government, while the ELN broke off preliminary talks with the government, alleging that the government was not serious about negotiations (Reuters 26 Dec 2002; EL NUEVO HERALD 30 Dec 2002).

Meanwhile, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, United Self- Defense Forces of Colombia), the federation of right-wing paramilitary organizations, declared a ceasefire on 1 December 2002 and it seemed that preliminary negotiations with the government might begin sometime during the first months of 2003. However, there continued to be divisions within the AUC, as a few paramilitary groups refused to participate in negotiations and others appeared to be breaking the ceasefire. At the same time, the FARC and the ELN

began combining forces to attack paramilitary bases in Antioquia and Bolívar departments, apparently to take advantage of the AUC ceasefire and possibly to undermine the proposed AUC-government negotiations, which the FARC ridiculed. Analysts cited in the Colombian media, noting the increasing collaboration between the FARC and the ELN, speculated that the two groups were looking to restore their once formal alliance (EL PAIS 23 Dec 2002; EL PAIS 2 Jan 2003; EL TIEMPO 23 Dec 2002; EL TIEMPO 27 Dec 2002; León 29 Dec 2002; EL COLOMBIANO 4 Jan 2003).

SOME SPECIFICALLY TARGETED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS:

The groups discussed below are not comprehensive. They are among the more frequently targeted categories of individuals and are thus representative of the kinds of people who are singled out for punishment, e.g., community leaders and citizens whose concern for peace, human rights, or injustice is perceived as a threat by the armed groups.

1) ACADEMICS, INTELLECTUALS AND TEACHERS

University figures and school teachers continued to be targeted, as both left-wing guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitary organizations maintained a presence on Colombian campuses and used violence and threats of violence against educators for political persuasion. In November 2002, the Minister of Education said that at least 800 teachers were operating under death threats from either the FARC, the ELN or paramilitary groups, principally but not exclusively in rural areas. In the first eight months of 2002, according to the Defensoría del Pueblo (Public Advocate), 36 educators were assassinated and 450 abandoned their teaching positions under threats from armed groups. The figure of 450 displaced teachers was more than half the number of teachers displaced in the previous sixteen years combined, according to the non-governmental Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES, Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement) (EL COLOMBIANO 3 Nov 2002; EL TIEMPO 18 Sep 2002).

University professors were under particular threat in the Caribbean coastal city of Barranquilla, where at least five university professors were murdered in the second half of 2002, a number of them shot to death by unidentified gunmen on motorcycles (Fontalvo 7 Nov 2002; EL COLOMBIANO 4 Dec 2002).

2) INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

By early August 2002, according to the United Nations, more than 100 members of Colombia's 80-plus indigenous communities had been killed due to political violence during the course of the year. Senator Gerardo Jumi, an indigenous leader, said, "There is genocide taking place in Colombia." Two months later, indigenous leader and former Senator Gabriel Mujuy stated that the number of indigenous killed during the year had risen to more than 150 (Reuters 9 Aug 2002; EL PAIS (CALI) 11 Oct 2002).

According to the Defensoría del Pueblo, Public Advocate, violations against indigenous people in 2002 included threats and intimidation, forced displacement and disappearances, as well as killings. The office attributed approximately 57 percent of the violations to right-wing paramilitaries, 16 percent to the FARC, 3 percent to the ELN, 20 percent to unidentified armed groups, and the remainder to national and local governmental authorities (EL COLOMBIANO 11 Dec 2002).

3) JOURNALISTS

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), three journalists were killed for their work in 2002 (the same number as in 2001 and 2002), putting Colombia, along with Russia, at the top of the world list for most journalists killed in reprisal for their reporting. The cases of a number of other murdered Colombian journalists were still being investigated to determine whether their deaths were related to professional activities. CPJ said that still other journalists had been threatened or forced into hiding, and that none of the crimes against journalists had been solved in what it described as a "culture of impunity that has pervaded Colombia for decades" (30 Oct 2002, 2 Jan 2003).

On 1 December 2002, Gimber Perdomo Zamora, the owner and operator of a local radio station in the south-central department of Huila was shot dead by a group of three people while walking down the street with his wife. By the count of the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), he was the seventh Colombian journalist killed in 2002, while Colombian police said they had recorded a total of eight. In the first eight months of 2002, according to the Defensoría del Pueblo (Public Advocate), 20 journalists were driven into exile by threats from one or another of the illegal armed groups (EL ESPECTADOR 3 Dec 2002; Reuters 3 Dec 2002; EL NUEVO HERALD 19 Sep 2002).

4) MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Medical workers, including doctors, nurses and technicians, as well as health facilities such as hospitals, clinics and ambulances, continued to be targeted by the FARC, the ELN and paramilitary organizations, particularly in conflictive areas, for kidnapping for ransom and to keep each other from securing treatment. In October 2002, Juan Luis Londoño, Colombian Minister of Health, said, "In the zones of conflict, armed groups block medical personnel trying to carrying out child vaccination programs. Hospitals and health care centers are turning into battlefields and doctors and nurses are under threat. These conditions are present in 20 percent of the national territory." In the first eight months of 2002, according to the Defensoría del Pueblo (Public Advocate) 32 health care workers were killed and eight disappeared and 180 displaced from their work and homes under threat from both left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries (EL ESPECTADOR 11 Oct 2002; EL NUEVO HERALD 19 Sep 2002).

In October 2002, the city government of Medellín denounced continuing attacks on

medical missions and health care facilities workers in the city by both urban militias of the FARC and paramilitary units of the AUC. On 9 October 2002, ten health care workers were kidnapped by the FARC in the western part of Medellín, an area of particularly intense fighting between FARC and AUC forces. The workers were released following payment of 2 million Colombian pesos, about 800 U.S. dollars (Ramírez Rendon 9 Oct 2002).

In August 2002, paramilitaries shot to death a nurse inside a health care center in the town of Miranda in the southwestern department of Cauca. Police said Amparo Figueroa had received threats while working in another town in Cauca, prompting health department officials to transfer her to Miranda (EL PAIS 17 Aug 2002).

5) MUNICIPAL AND OTHER GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

In May 2002, the FARC began a sharp escalation of death threats and attacks against officials in the country's 1,098 municipalities, an attempt to usurp the authority of the state at the local level, according to analysts cited in the Colombian media. Municipal officials also continued to be targeted by paramilitary groups. In July 2002 the FARC issued a nationwide threat of death or kidnapping to all municipal officials, as well as to officials of the country's 32 departmental governments, if they did not resign. By October 2002 more than half of the country's mayors had personally received death threats, mostly from the FARC but also from paramilitary organizations, according to the Federación Colombiana de Municipios (FCM, Colombian Federation of Municipalities) (HOUSTON CHRONICLE 16 Jun 2002; Rangel Suárez 29 Dec 2002; Nesmith 10 Jul 2002; WASHINGTON POST 18 Nov 2002; CHICAGO TRIBUNE 20 Nov 2002).

According to the FCM, thirteen mayors were assassinated in the first eleven months of 2002, most evidently by the FARC. Also during that period, 60 members of municipal councils were killed, 43 between May and November, again mostly by the FARC, according to the Federación Nacional de Concejales (FNC, National Federation of Councilors). The FARC stepped up such attacks in the fourth quarter of 2002. By December more than 300 mayors had fled their towns, many moving their offices to military and police installations in departmental capitals, according to the FMC. More than 1,500 of the country's approximately 12,000 municipal councilors also had fled. Meanwhile, the Uribe government admitted that there was no police or other public force in about 200 of the country's municipalities (EL TIEMPO 19 Nov 2002; EL TIEMPO 3 Dec 2002; EL TIEMPO 5 Dec 2002; EL TIEMPO 6 Dec 2002; AP 6 Dec 2002).

6) RELIGIOUS FIGURES

By November 2002, the number of attacks on religious figures—threats, kidnappings and killings—was about double the number for 2001. According to the Observatorio de los Derechos Humanos, the human rights office of the nation's vice president, twelve Catholic Church figures were killed. Four priests were killed in October 2002 alone. The majority of

the murders were carried out by the FARC, but the Catholic Church continued to be targeted by the ELN and right-wing paramilitaries as well. According to the Attorney General's office, the FARC was responsible for the daylight killing of Monsignor Isaías Duarte Cancino, the Archbishop of Cali, on 16 March 2002. The FARC was also responsible for the kidnapping of Monsignor Jorge Jiménez, president of the Latin American Episcopal Conference, later in the year (Grillo 29 Dec 2002; SEMANA 27 Oct 2002; EL PAIS 16 Dec 2002).

In December 2002, Human Rights Watch stated that, "church leaders who speak out in favor of peace and human rights or who protest abuses are targeted by both sides, often during mass or prayer services." It condemned the attacks on Catholic Church figures, including the murder of a nun, and added that Protestant churches were targeted as well, with eighteen Protestant pastors killed in Colombia in the first eleven months of 2002 (HRW 23 Dec 2002).

7) TRADE UNIONISTS

In 2002 Colombia continued to be one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a trade unionist. In the first ten months of the year, 151 were killed, an average of 15.1 per month. That was nearly equal the rate of killings in 2001, when 184 killings of trade unionists were recorded, or 15.3 per month. The great majority of attacks against trade unionists continued to be by paramilitaries, although left-wing guerrillas were responsible in some cases. Meanwhile, according to Colombian trade unions, Colombian police at times utilized brutal methods against peaceful worker demonstrations and marches (ICFTU 10 Dec 2002; ICFTU 13 May 2002; Geitner 17 Jun 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.

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Last Modified 05/05/2003