

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Colombia: Amnesty International condemns recent spate of killings of human rights defenders

Amnesty International today condemned the killing of two local human rights defenders and community activists. The organization has over the last year expressed concern about an apparent increase in threats against and killings of human rights defenders, community leaders and trade unionists, most of which have reportedly been carried out by paramilitaries.

On 29 June an unidentified man shot and killed Martha Cecilia Obando in the San Francisco neighbourhood of the port city of Buenaventura in the department of Valle del Cauca. He apparently shot her three times while she walked in the street. Martha Cecilia Obando was president of the San Francisco Neighbourhood Association of Displaced Women (Asociación de Mujeres Desplazadas del Barrio San Francisco, ASODESFRAN). The killing follows a series of threats against and killings of leaders of displaced communities in Valle del Cauca.

On 24 June a group of armed men, who witnesses claimed were paramilitaries, entered the Afro-descendant community of Candelilla de la Mar in the municipality of Tumaco, department of Nariño, and abducted and, shortly afterwards, shot dead Felipe Landazury, a community leader and member of the Community Council of Bajo Mira y Frontera.

Paramilitary groups were supposed to have disbanded in a government-sponsored demobilization process which began in 2003. Despite repeated government claims that paramilitaries are no longer active in Colombia, it is clear that they continue to operate, often with the support and acquiescence of the security forces, and to threaten and kill human rights defenders and other activists who they repeatedly label as guerrilla sympathizers or auxiliaries.

Amnesty International calls on the Colombian authorities to immediately initiate a thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Martha Cecilia Obando and Felipe Landazury, and into all other threats and killings of human rights defenders and of other activists.

The government must also publicly condemn these killings and threats, and reaffirm the legitimacy of human rights work in Colombia, and take effective and long-overdue measures to once and for all disband paramilitary groups and bring to justice all those responsible for human rights abuses, whether paramilitaries, guerrillas or members of the security forces.

Under the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, states, including Colombia, have a duty to respect and take all the necessary measures to ensure the protection of human rights defenders and their work. This not only includes practical protection measures, but also comprehensive measures to prevent abuses and to address the root causes of such abuses.

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