3-18-2005

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Peace Communities Under Military Attack
by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2005-03-18

A massacre of eight civilians has brought scrutiny to the Colombian armed forces regarding accusations that soldiers from the 17th Brigade hacked to death members of the "Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado." The government, shortly after international calls for a full-scale investigation of the massacre began pouring in, announced that it would no longer tolerate the existence of peace communities and deployed military detachments to them, even after members of the communities threatened to leave their homes as a protest against military presence.

The mass murder of eight community members, among them the internationally renowned founder of the community, one baby, two other children, and a 15-year-old girl, has once again brought into focus accusations that the Colombian military, which receives hundreds of millions of dollars in US aid annually, is involved in serious abuses of human rights.

Eight found hacked to death in San Jose de Apartado

The Feb. 21 massacre in the Uraba district of northwest Colombia in the department of Antioquia, a banana-growing region near the Panamanian border, was brutal even by the standards of Colombia's long-running conflict. The victims residents of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, which sought to isolate itself from the war by barring armed groups were hacked to death with machetes, chopped into pieces, and buried on a farm, according to Amerigo Incalcaterra, a UN human rights official who visited the region. Among the victims were three young children and a 15-year-old girl. Eduardo Luis Guerra, the founder of the community who had often traveled abroad seeking support, was found dead with signs of torture alongside his wife's body.

A former mayor, a priest, and a human rights lawyer have publicly accused army troops of committing the massacre. Prosecutors are investigating, although no charges have been filed. Incalcaterra said residents are terrified more bloodshed will occur. He also called for a full investigation by independent prosecutors from Bogota, saying the killers must be tried, "no matter who they are."

The Colombian Army's 17th Brigade denied it was responsible and said the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) appeared to have carried out the massacre. Military statements went so far as to allege that members of the community had conspired with the FARC to have the community members massacred, a statement that observers called a dangerous accusation for community members. But a cleric who has been close to residents of the peace community said they believe soldiers, suspecting that the guerrillas had infiltrated the community, carried out the massacre in retaliation for a rebel ambush last month that killed 19 members of the 17th Brigade. The cleric did not want to be identified for security reasons. There have also been accusations that members of the Army's 11th Brigade were involved.
Some US aid at stake

If the US finds that members of the Colombian military were responsible for the massacre, it would be obligated to suspend some of its aid to the country. At stake is US$35 million in aid to the Colombian forces, approximately 5% of what the administration of President George W. Bush has requested the US Congress to send this year. A similar amount would be at stake in a subsequent certification, but the bulk of aid does not have to go through the certification process. The US sends more aid to Colombia than any other country in the hemisphere, with the vast majority of the money going to the armed forces.

The Bush administration said in February that it was seeking US$589.5 million in military aid in 2006 for Colombia, where a 40-year-old conflict pits government forces against the FARC and a smaller leftist rebel group, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). Outlawed right-wing paramilitary forces have also been battling the rebels, with frequent allegations of a paramilitary-military nexus.

The US is urging Colombia to investigate thoroughly whether its military was involved in the massacre, a State Department official said March 4. "We have urged the government to...swiftly bring to justice those responsible for this crime," the official said on condition of anonymity. Even before the massacre, the US had reason to doubt the Colombian armed forces' respect for human rights.

In its annual report released in the first week of March, the State Department cited several rights violations in 2004 but added that "respect for human rights improved in some areas." Among the cases cited: - On Aug. 5, soldiers from the army's 18th Brigade which has been trained by US Special Forces in counterinsurgency tactics killed three trade union members in eastern Colombia's Arauca state. The Colombian soldiers were ordered arrested at least until the investigation is complete. - On Aug. 28, some leftist legislators denounced an alleged plot to assassinate leftist politicians and labor leaders. The plot, known as Operation Dragon, allegedly involved members of the military. An investigation by the attorney general's office is ongoing.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will certify in the coming weeks whether Colombia's human rights record is good enough to warrant full military aid. "I don't know how they can possibly certify right now, as long as doubts exist about this massacre," said Adam Isacson, a Colombia expert with the Center for International Policy (CIP) in Washington. "Even within the Bush administration, there are people who take human rights very seriously."

Defense minister: "There will be no demilitarized zones" The government said that it will no longer tolerate the existence of peace communities that seek to isolate themselves from Colombia's civil war by barring all armed groups including the military from entering, the defense minister said in a radio interview not long after the US and UN called for an investigation of the massacre.

Defense Minister Jorge Alberto Uribe made the announcement following accusations that insurgent groups were using the communities to escape government troops and smuggle drugs and arms. "In Colombia there will be no demilitarized zones. There cannot be peace communities without the presence of government forces," Uribe told Caracol radio on March 8.
Defense Ministry press releases said that "all of Colombia should be a peace community," although the armed forces have yet to provide peace in Colombia for four straight decades. "The objective would be that we make all Colombia a peace community. What we cannot permit is that in the country there are some places where the state cannot have a presence," said Uribe. Uribe has denied that the murders were committed by the security forces, which, he said, were cooperating fully with the prosecutors in their efforts to clarify the incidents.

Military authorities also denied that troops of the 17th Brigade were present in that area on Feb. 21. "We have a right not to live with the victimizers" As the government announced plans to send military forces into the community, along with the country's seven other peace communities, the people of San Jose de Apartado released a statement saying, "We have a right not to live with the victimizers. We need the army to leave San Jose. Now they are around our houses, our schools, our children." The community of about 1,300 campesinos said, "We are urging the Colombian state to maintain no armed presence in our settlements and our places of work. This situation puts us at extreme risk because it turns us into military targets."

Community members have said they would welcome any civil authority, but not the military. They threatened to leave the area, which would add their number to Colombia's 3 million internal refugees. The peace community, created by 350 campesinos in March 1997 with the backing of the Catholic Church, declares itself neutral in Colombia's armed conflict, banning the presence of any weapons in its territory and refusing to cooperate with any of the armed factions, whether left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, or the army. Guerra, the slain leader of the peace community, frequently represented it in contacts with the government and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which in 2000 ordered that precautionary measures be taken to protect the community.

In December 1997, the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) ordered that provisional measures be taken to protect the community. In April 2004, Colombia's Constitutional Court requested effective protection for the 1,300 people living in the community at that time. The court reported that members of the community are frequently victims of massacres and selective killings, forced disappearance, arbitrary detention, rape, torture, death threats and persecution, burnings of homes and shops, bombings, and paramilitary checkpoints where they are robbed of their goods.

Before the latest killings, 47 of the community's 350 founding members had already been killed, and 146 members of the community, mainly leaders, have been slain since it was created. Of the 380 human rights violations that have been reported, not one has ever been clarified. Since its creation, the peace community has frequently been attacked by paramilitary militias and the army, which act in coordination, according to rural activists as well as leading human rights watchdogs like Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW). It has also been the target of guerrilla violence.

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