

The Colombia Coalition repels extrajudicial executions of youngsters in various parts of Colombia and demands serious investigations into the matter

Bogotá, October 30th 2008

The bodies of 19 youngsters were found in communal graves in the municipality of Ocaña- Norte de Santander department- and in Cimitarra- Santander del Sur department. These denunciations became public knowledge a couple of weeks ago and reported that the youngsters in question were originally from urban areas of the Cundinamarca department and Bogotá -Ciudad Bolívar and Alamos del Sur. This is- yet again- a source of the utmost concern, given the persistence of such systematic practice of extrajudicial executions against children and youth, perpetrated by illegal armed groups in connivance with the Colombian public force.

According to official reports, the youngsters would have been deceived and recruited by paramilitary groups still operating in the municipalities of Soacha and Ciudad Bolívar in Bogotá. The government calls these groups as bands newly formed between January and August of this year. The victims were registered in forensic medicine between 2 and 5 days after they had been reported missing. They were all young men between the ages of 17 and 32, who were presented by the army as members of illegal armed groups who had died in action.

Accounts provided by close relatives of the victims prove that during the year these young men had been frequently approached by outsiders who would invite them to parties, in order to gain their trust, and subsequently offered them a very well-paid job working in farms in the east of the country- *Llanos orientales*-, with the possibility of returning to their homes a few months later. Some did not accept the offer, but others were not so lucky. A mother of one of the victims explains that she made sure her son would take everything he needed and accompanied him to bid him farewell. In the case of her son, and others with him, she added that *"there were three trucks where there could have been around 40 other young men standing up"*.

The finding of 11 other bodies in another part of the country- Tolúviejo, Sucre department- warns of a systematic recruitment practice of young men with a deceit strategy, and their subsequent execution by "allegedly" demobilized paramilitary groups -such as the Black Eagles- with the support of the public force. In line with denunciations of youngsters disappeared under similar circumstances – in Bosa, Engativá, and Soacha localities- cases could rise as high as 100 given that, as stated during and interview with the Colombian Magazine "Semana" by a soldier whose brother was reported as "false positive", this was an everyday practice.

Extrajudicial executions and massive recruitment of youngsters in urban areas by paramilitary groups are far from new. Since 2003, the Colombia Coalition, as well as other national human rights organizations and control bodies, the Colombian Congress, and international human rights organizations, have publicly denounced the systematic violations committed against children and youth in the municipalities of Soacha and Ciudad Bolívar. Poverty, the lack of opportunities and the absence of public policies to overcome the situation of marginalization the population lives in provide the fertile ground for illegal armed groups to do their job and persecute children and youth, purely on the basis of their condition. To worsen matters, the public force, who despite having set military bases in the area, tolerates and/or participates in these acts, and entail yet another risk for the population whose rights- particularly those of adolescents- are continuously violated.

Months after the army tried to hide the events- reporting the victims as having died in action; after the findings of the special force investigating the cases started to pinpoint at the involvement of the public force in the cases; and after high-level government officials had publicly stated that the victims had died in action and were "no saints" and "not exactly working in farms", "not exactly picking coffee", the government itself - given the

seriousness of the matter and the impossibility of further hiding the events- issued an official communiqué last October 30th, ordering the dismissal of 19 officers and 6 noncommissioned officers, reaffirming its commitment to “cero tolerance to human rights violations”.

For the Colombian Coalition, the seriousness of these and other “false-positives” related events warrants the launching of a serious and non-biased investigation that leads to clear up the events that took place, as well as the responsibility of high-level government officials and military commands in charge of implementing the Democratic Security Policy.

Based on the above, the Colombia Coalition:

1. Calls on the national authorities to restore the dignity of children, youths and their families, who were the victims of these events and who, initially, were pinpointed as members of illegal armed groups who died in action.
2. Reminds that- in accordance with the jurisprudence of the Colombian Constitutional Court and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights- the rightful judge to investigate these events is the Ordinary Criminal Justice as oppose to the Military Criminal Justice, as the events being dealt with here are serious human rights violations which alleged actual perpetrators are officers from the Colombian public force.
3. Reiterates the importance of the fact that the Attorney General's Office moves forward- independently and impartially- in the investigation of the events; guarantees the appropriate protection of victims; and witnesses and sanctions perpetrators with the highest harshness and within a reasonable timeframe.
4. Demands from the government the guarantees for social and human rights organizations to continue accompanying the victims under secure conditions.
5. Reminds that the Procurator General's Office, in fulfillment of its constitutional mandate to “safeguard human rights and ensure their effectiveness, aided by the Ombudsperson”, must carry out disciplinary investigations on the officers responsible for the events.
6. Urges the Colombian Congress to foster a public debate on the seriousness of the situation in the area and nationwide, and requests the accountability of the relevant authorities.
7. Makes an urgent call on the Accusation Commission of the Chamber of Representatives to open an investigation on the Colombian President, supreme commander of the armed forces, given that the issues dealt with here are grave human rights violations and breaches of International Humanitarian Law.
8. Highlights the importance of the United Nations Office for Human Rights in providing accompaniment and following up the case, given its task to “*observe, systematically and analytically, the situation of human rights and humanitarian law throughout the country*”.
9. Urges the International Criminal Court to follow the situation up and in case the events are not effectively investigated within the national jurisdiction, to guarantee the rights of the victims to truth, justice and reparation- in compliance with the Rome Statute- acknowledging and taking the case to a superior court.



Coalición contra la vinculación
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conflicto armado en Colombia

It cannot be allowed for the deaths of these children and young men to go unpunished, for this type of events to be shrouded in the veil of impunity. The persecution and murder of innocent young men, while perpetrators roam the streets freely protected by impunity is not acceptable. There is no justification to continue attacking the civil population and stigmatizing communities who have the courage to publicly speak out and denounce the human rights violations they are subjected to as a result of actions carried out by armed groups with the support of the very agents from the Colombian state.

Coalition against the Involvement of Boys, Girls and Youth in the Armed Conflict in Colombia