

Colombia: Students in the Firing Line

A report on human rights abuses suffered by Colombian university students





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COLOMBIA

Foreword

Colombia is probably the most dangerous country in the world in which to be a student activist. In recent years numerous university students have been assassinated as a direct result of their involvement in student politics and campaigns. Physical attacks, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and death threats are also common and have forced many Colombian students to abandon their studies or even their homes – some forced into exile abroad.

Student leaders and activists, especially those involved in campaigns to promote and safeguard public education or human rights, are at greatest risk. Those holding leadership positions in the main organisations representing Colombian university students – the partner organisations of the British NUS – are also specifically targeted.

The Colombian State does little to prevent the attacks and even less to apprehend and punish the perpetrators and, in effect, there is complete impunity for those that murder or harass Colombian students. Even more alarming is the direct involvement of the Colombian state security forces in many of the attacks, and, on at least three occasions in recent years, members of the Colombian military or police have actually carried out the assassinations of student activists themselves. It is also concerning that senior Colombian officials, including President Alvaro Uribe himself, continue to make public statements equating student leaders and organisations with terrorism and/or armed leftwing guerrilla groups – accusations that put them in grave danger.

Paramilitary death squads have been responsible for the majority of the attacks on Colombian students in recent years but organisations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights have repeatedly shown how the paramilitaries collude with the state security forces.

With the Colombian State so complicit in the abuses, those under threat have few places to turn.

Raising awareness internationally is one of the things that we can do to help. The Colombian regime is acutely sensitive to international public opinion. Students, as well as others under threat in Colombia such as trade unionists, journalists and human rights defenders, have made it clear that international pressure makes a great deal of difference.

For this reason we hope that our own Government will take heed of the recommendations at the end of this report. Those recommendations include speaking out more forcefully about the human rights abuses being perpetrated against Colombian university students, ending UK assistance to the Colombian security forces and making future support for the Colombian regime conditional upon an improvement in the human rights situation.

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President, National Union of Students

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General Secretary, University and College Union

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Recent Assassinations of Colombian University Students



1. Oscar Leonardo Salas, a linguistics student at the District University in the Colombian capital Bogota, dies after being shot by members of the ESMAD riot police unit on March 7th 2006. Oscar was active in the ACEU student organisation and helped manage a student radio station.



2. William Ortiz, a social sciences student at Valle University, was shot dead by unknown assailants on 10th April 2006 in the town of Yumbo.

3. Julian Andres Hurtado, a student at the Medical School of Valle University, was shot dead by two paramilitaries on October 4th 2006 as he entered his home in the city of Cali. Julian was the leader of the student council at his university and active in the campaign to prevent the privatisation of public education. He had received several death threats and had been followed in the past and although this had been reported to the authorities he was offered no protection. He was also active in the youth wing of the Democratic Pole, one of Colombia's main opposition parties.



4. Milton Troyano Sanchez, a biology student at the University of Cauca, was shot dead by paramilitaries on October 19th 2006 as he walked through a park in the city of Popayan after leaving the university campus. He was a student leader at his university, a member of the student council and active in human rights campaigns and the campaign to prevent the privatisation of public education.

5-8. Yuri Martinez (a history student), Dreiver Melo (a law student), Darwin Penaranda (a history student) and Jose Saballet (a biology student), were assassinated on 24th October 2006 on the University of Atlantico campus, where all of them studied, in the city of Barranquilla.



9. William Alexander Moreno Gonzalez, a business studies student, was shot dead by army-backed paramilitaries from the 'AUC' death squad on February 7th 2007 in the town of Supia. He had been active in the youth wing of the Democratic Pole, one of Colombia's main opposition parties.

10. Katherine Soto Ospina, an environmental sciences student at Valle University, was shot dead by troops of the 2nd Marine Infantry Brigade of the Colombian Navy on August 3rd 2007 during a visit to the San Cipriano tourist attraction in the municipality of Buenaventura in Valle department. The soldiers opened fire without warning killing Katherine immediately and seriously wounding her friend and fellow university student Rolando Quintero. Katherine was a student leader at her university.



11. Martin Hernandez Gaviria, a political sciences student at the National University of Colombia, was shot dead by rightwing paramilitaries on January 14th 2008 near the university campus in the city of Medellin. Martin was a national leader of the FEU student organisation and was active in human rights campaigns.

12. Oscar Antonio Sosa Paz, a student in the city of Barrancabermeja, was shot dead by paramilitaries on April 26th 2008 in the 'Boston' neighbourhood of the city.

13. Eder Enrique Sierra, a student of ethnic education at the University of Guajira, was shot twice in the head by unknown assassins on 9th March 2009.

14. Enrique Diego Perez, a student of agronomy at the Open University for Distance Learning (UNAD) was assassinated by unknown assailants on 16th March 2009 in the town of Pitalito. He had been active in student politics and was a member of the student council.

15. Juan David Jimenez Caballos, a student of business administration at Valle University, was assassinated on 26th March 2009.

16. Carlos Andres Rizo Alvarez, a student of social communication at the University of Ocana, was assassinated on 23rd May 2009.

Introduction

Colombia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for students and recent years have seen a sharp deterioration in the situation.

The increase in attacks has been considerable: Over the 19 years between 1985 and 2004 the total number of human rights violations recorded against students was 93, whilst in the past three years alone (2006-2008) a total of 99 violations have been perpetrated.

The abuses recorded have included assassinations, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture and forced displacement. Death threats and accusations of links to Colombia's guerrilla insurgency, sometimes made very publicly by senior Colombian officials, are also commonplace.

Most abuses appear to have been perpetrated by rightwing paramilitary groups, sometimes acting in collusion with the state security forces. The Colombian police and army are also implicated in many of the abuses.

This report focuses on attacks against university students though secondary school students, and even, in rare cases, primary school students, are also targeted – for example 15-year-old secondary school student activist Nicolas Neira was beaten to death by police officers in the Colombian capital Bogota in 2005. The report focuses on 2006, 2007 and 2008 though the abuses are continuing and during the period that this report was being put together (March to May 2009) a further four university students were assassinated – see opposite page for details.

The abuses faced by university students are systematic; they occur in universities all over the country and students involved in campaigning and members of student groups such as the Colombian Association of University Students (ACEU) and the Federation of University Students (FEU) have been hit the hardest. Colombian student organisations have repeatedly released statements identifying their organisations and members as victims of systematic persecution by the state security forces and calling for international pressure on the Colombian regime in an effort to halt the attacks.

Many students are killed or attacked soon after their precarious security situation has been drawn to the attention of the authorities – who rarely take measures to protect them. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights has on several occasions asked that steps be taken to protect the student community and its freedom of expression; however these requests seem to have been ignored by the Colombian regime. This lack of action, even when it is clear that such people are in danger, would indicate that the Colombian State is either unwilling or unable to protect its citizens.

The intensity and systematic nature of the abuses, together with the lack of protection afforded to those student activists identified as being in danger, indicates that Colombian university students are experiencing a deliberate campaign of persecution. That so many abuses are perpetrated by the state security forces further indicates complicity on the part of the State, as does the fact that so few of those responsible for murdering or attacking students in Colombia are brought to justice.

Human rights abuses

Assassinations and Forced Disappearances

Between 2006 and 2008 at least twelve Colombian university students were assassinated. Most were well-known leaders of the student movement and were killed as a direct result of their involvement in student politics. Nearly all had received death threats prior to their deaths – and these had been drawn to the attention of the authorities – though none of them had been provided with any form of protection. The majority of the killings were carried out by army-backed paramilitary death squads whilst others were carried out directly by members of the security forces. Nobody has been arrested for any of the crimes.

In addition to the assassinations, students have also been forcibly disappeared as was the case of Andres Felipe Villa Mesa, a 20-year-old student living in the town of Sabaneta in Antioquia region. On June 14th 2007 six members of the DAS secret police, which reports directly to the Colombian President, arrived at his home and took him away. He has not been seen since.

Arbitrary Detention

Between 2006 and 2008 there were more than 20 cases in which student activists were arbitrarily detained. Such detentions are carried out without arrest warrants, regularly involve physical and verbal abuse, and are targeted at either individual students or groups of students. In some cases those that are detained have been tortured and it would appear that such tactics are designed to deter students from engaging in political activities, especially those that involve human rights issues.

Two illustrative cases occurred in May 2007: On the 24th of that month members of the Colombian National Police arbitrarily detained Miguel Oswaldo Avellaneda Lizcano, a student at the University of Los Llanos and member of the Student Committee for the Defence of Human Rights. During the detention he was physically beaten, threatened and accused of being a guerrilla. A week later, on May 31st, members of the ESMAD riot police arbitrarily detained 16 students from the University of Cauca to prevent them from participating in a protest against the privatisation of public education.

Death Threats

Between January 2006 and July 2008 at least 57 death threats directed at individual student leaders or student organisations have been registered in Colombia. Most have targeted groups such as the ACEU and the FEU and the majority accuse those named of links to guerrilla movements. In 36 cases the threats were made by rightwing paramilitary groups, whilst in 18 cases the threats were made directly by members of the state security forces. One threat was made face-to-face by paramilitaries and members of the security forces working together and in two cases the perpetrator could not be identified.

Nine of the 57 threats also involved physical intimidation that caused injury, eight of which were carried out by members of the state security forces. For example: On October 10th 2007 members of the ESMAD riot police threatened and attacked a group of student activists at the University of Narino. Elder Flavio Guerrero Vallejo, was blinded in one eye as a result of the attack whilst another student, Xiomara Erazo, a member of the Francisco Isaías Cifuentes Network for Human Rights, was threatened with murder.

Forced Displacement

Since 2006 there have been at least seven cases where threats have forced students to leave their place of education. Three of the displacements were the result of threats from the Colombian state security forces.

The gravity of the situation is such that Diego Fernando Marin, the National Secretary of the ACEU and student representative on the superior council of the National University of Colombia, has recently been granted political asylum in Norway. In late August 2008 the executive committee of ACEU, including Mr Marin, were threatened in broad daylight in the centre of Bogota by men on motorbikes. After further threats were made to kill him Mr Marin was forced to flee the country.

Stigmatisation of Students

Senior members of the Colombian government have repeatedly accused student organisations of being fronts for leftwing guerrilla groups. Such accusations are regularly followed by paramilitary death threats or attacks on those mentioned. The Colombian media often exacerbates the situation by implying that student leaders and organisations are linked in some way to the guerrillas.

President Uribe himself publicly accused Diego Marin, the leader of ACEU, the largest student organisation in Colombia, of being linked to guerrilla groups. Mr Marin was forced to flee into exile.

In another case the Colombian authorities, in November 2008, publicly accused students at the National University in Bogota of being linked to the FARC guerrilla group. Days later several paramilitary death threats appeared at the University declaring that 33 students and their families were "military targets".

Collusion

In some cases members of the Colombian state security forces collaborate with rightwing paramilitary death squads to harass, intimidate or attack student activists. In one case, on October 1st 2008, four paramilitaries and two police officers together threatened students of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University Institution of Envigado near the city of Medellin. In another case, on February 13th 2008, Carlos Andres Ospina, a sociology student at the University of Caldas, was detained and threatened by three members of the DAS secret police accompanied by a paramilitary. Mr Ospina is a student leader, an active member of the Organisation of Sociology Students and the regional coordinator of an alternative media project.

Note: The above information was taken from the database of the Catholic NGO CINEP, one of Colombia's foremost human rights groups.



ESMAD riot police attack a student rally



Student activists hold a memorial to some of their murdered friends



Members of the Colombian security forces fire into the campus of the National University in the Colombian capital Bogotá



A detained student



Police officers detain a student leader during an event in the Colombian capital Bogotá



A protest in Colombia against the ongoing killing of student activists



A poster produced by the Colombian student union which says "Students are not terrorists. Terrorist is the State which disappears and assassinates us."

Conclusion and Recommendations

It seems clear that student activists in Colombian universities, and in particular those involved in student organisations or campaigns, are the target of persecution. Attacks against them occur in numerous different institutions throughout the country on a regular basis and can therefore be described as systematic.

Those most in danger are students involved in campaigns to defend human rights or prevent privatisation, those that speak out or protest against government policies and those that are involved with political opposition parties. All of them are frequently accused of links to Colombia's guerrilla insurgency and all receive death threats – some of which are subsequently carried out.

The response of the Colombian State has been wholly inadequate. In many cases the state security forces themselves are the perpetrators of the abuses, in others statements by senior government officials put students in direct danger of attack, and in virtually all of the cases little or nothing has been done to bring the perpetrators to justice.

This State complicity in the abuses reflects the situation faced by other sectors of Colombian civil society, such as trade unionists and human rights defenders, where the majority of the violence perpetrated against them can be linked to the Colombian regime.

It is difficult to see the persecution of the Colombian student movement as anything more than an attempt to silence dissent and criminalise opposition.

We hope that the UK Government will take this situation into account in their future dealings with the Colombian authorities and call on our Government to:

- Be bolder in its condemnation of human rights abuses in Colombia

Whilst recent Foreign Office statements have placed additional emphasis on human rights, the Government should go further and be more vocal in their criticism and condemnation of human rights abuses in Colombia; the Government should not shy away from condemning the Colombian State, when necessary, for their involvement in the abuses and should make it clear that statements equating student leaders and organisations with the guerrilla insurgency are utterly unacceptable.

- End assistance to the Colombian state security forces

It is unacceptable for the Colombian security forces to benefit from any sort of UK assistance so long as they continue to be one of the principle perpetrators of human rights abuses against Colombian students; the resources freed up should be redirected to assisting the victims of the Colombian conflict and addressing some of the inequalities that exacerbate it.

- Make any trade benefits available to Colombia dependant on an end to the killings and other abuses perpetrated against students

The United States recently rejected a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia due to the high numbers of killings of trade unionists. The European Union is currently negotiating a similar Agreement with Colombia although to date no human rights conditions appear to have been placed in the Agreement. The UK Government should make it clear that no Free Trade Agreement with Colombia will be forthcoming until the attacks on students and other civil society actors end.

What you can do

- Write to or e-mail the Colombian Ambassador condemning the ongoing attacks against Colombian university students. You can e-mail the Ambassador via elondres@cancilleria.gov.co or write to: The Colombian Ambassador, Colombian Embassy, 3 Hans Crescent, London, SW1X 0LN
- Contact your MP asking them to speak out about the attacks on Colombian university students. Ask them to call on the UK Government to speak out about the issue too. To see who your MP is and how to contact them visit: <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk>
- Contact the Foreign Secretary asking the UK Government to implement the recommendations made in this report. Contact details can be found at <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en>
- Contact your MEP asking him or her to ensure that the European Union does not sign a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia until the Colombian State stops abusing human rights. You can find out who your MEP is and their contact details at <http://www.europarl.org.uk>
- Join Justice for Colombia or visit their website for regular updates about the situation in Colombia www.justiceforcolombia.org
- Arrange an event or meeting at your university to highlight the issues being faced by students in Colombia. Justice for Colombia can provide a short film about the problems facing Colombian university students, campaigning materials and, sometimes, a speaker from Colombia. E-mail the office for more information: info@justiceforcolombia.org



The National Union of Students (NUS)

NUS is a voluntary membership organisation that works to promote, defend and extend the rights of students. It is the largest student organisation in Europe and represents the interests of more than 7 million students in post-16 education across the UK.

www.nus.org.uk



The University and College Union (UCU)

UCU is the trade union representing staff working in further and higher education in the UK.

It has over 120,000 members.

www.ucu.org.uk



Justice for Colombia (JFC)

JFC is a coalition of more than 50 British organisations which campaigns for human rights in Colombia.

www.justiceforcolombia.org



A mural in Valle University commemorating three students at the University who have been assassinated.