



Colombia: FARC Kills 17 from Indigenous Group

Government Needs to Protect, Aid Nariño Civilians

February 10, 2009

(Washington, DC, February 10, 2009) - The recent killings of some 17 members of the Awa indigenous community by the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the state of Nariño shows its utter disregard for the lives of civilians and refusal to respect the most basic tenets of humanitarian law, Human Rights Watch said today.

According to reports Human Rights Watch received from reliable sources, the FARC has killed approximately 17 Awa members, including at least two minors, in Nariño in recent days. Many of the victims are reported to have been tortured. The killings come on the heels of several other attacks that the government has attributed to the FARC, including a bombing in downtown Bogota that killed two civilians and attacks in Cali and Arauca.

"These cruel killings violate the most basic principles of human decency and dignity," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. "There is no possible excuse or justification for these horrific actions."

Human Rights Watch called on the national, state, and local governments to take immediate action to provide assistance to the displaced population and victims, to protect the civilian population in Nariño, and to ensure that all abuses in the region, by all armed groups or forces, are thoroughly investigated and prosecuted.

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly visited the southern border state of Nariño, which has a heavy presence of various armed groups and Colombian military forces and has one of the worst human rights and humanitarian situations in Colombia. The Awa territories, especially in the municipalities of Barbaçoas, Magui Payan, and Roberto Payan, have been particularly affected.

The Office of the Ombudsman of Colombia (Defensoría del Pueblo) had, through its Early Warning System, previously issued a formal "risk report" warning authorities that civilians in the region were at risk. On January 8, 2009, the ombudsman's office reiterated the warning, noting that these communities were at risk as the Army, FARC, National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas, and new armed groups linked to the paramilitaries had been fighting for control of the area.

The ombudsman's latest report warned of a serious risk that the FARC would retaliate against civilians in the area, accusing them of collaborating with the Army or ELN. Meanwhile, new armed groups that emerged after the supposed demobilization of the paramilitaries are reported to have been engaging in threats, extortion, selective killings of civilians they accuse of being

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allied with the guerrillas, enforced disappearances and displacement, and rape of women and children.

According to information Human Rights Watch received, the region is now suffering a severe humanitarian crisis. The FARC is reported to have "confined" some villages, cutting them off from the outside world and refusing to let anyone enter or leave. It has also been laying antipersonnel landmines in the region. Large numbers of civilians are reported to have been displaced, and apparently have not yet received meaningful assistance from the government, according to Human Rights Watch's sources.

Civilians from the most vulnerable sectors of society, including Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups, are among the most adversely affected by the violence in Nariño.

Human Rights Watch called on the government, in addition to taking immediate action to aid and protect civilians, to improve its response to warnings from the Early Warning System.

"The Early Warning System of the ombudsman's office often issues excellent risk reports warning of serious threats to civilians, yet too many times, we have seen that the authorities that are supposed to respond fail to do so in time," said Vivanco.

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