

# briefing

## Colombia

*Southern Córdoba pastors under threat*

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## **I. Resurgence of Paramilitary Groups in Southern Córdoba Endangers Christian Leaders**

Over the past year, the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace (CRVP), CSW's partner organisation in Colombia, has documented dozens of incidents targeting church leaders and their families in the region of Southern Córdoba. The situation has escalated over the summer and CSW believes, along with our partners, that the region is now at the point of humanitarian crisis. Worryingly, the majority of the incidents, which include extortion, assassinations and attempted assassinations, forced displacement and death threats, have all taken place in a limited geographic area to the south of the capital, Montería, encompassing Montelíbano, Puerto Libertador and Planeta Rica. The region is a major coca growing area and is strategically important for anyone seeking to dominate the regional cocaine trade. FARC guerrillas, a number of different paramilitary groups, as well as government security forces all have a significant presence in the region.

Over the past three years, the CRVP and CSW have consistently denounced the re-arming and remobilization of paramilitary groups in the region. These groups have claimed responsibility or are implicated in all of the cases documented below. Competition for territory between the illegal armed groups seems to have escalated over the past year. Based on information from communities on the ground CSW and our partners believe that the different armed groups are now each attempting to consolidate their power on the local level. As has occurred in the past, they appear to have identified pastors as key community leaders who must be coerced into a cooperative relationship with the armed groups or eliminated.

In 2008 there were 512 violent deaths, including more than six massacres, and various massive displacements in the department of Córdoba. This was the highest number in the past eighteen years. If recent events and the reports from the first half of 2009 are any indication, the number will be even higher this year. One pastor from the area was forced into hiding in late September after his attempted abduction following repeated threats from paramilitary organisations. Another pastor was brutally shot to death only a few weeks earlier in a nearby town. This followed the assassinations of three church leaders over the summer. A considerable number of pastors from the region have been forcibly displaced after receiving death threats.

The illegal armed groups responsible for these violations have, on occasions, tried to justify their actions with a variety of rationales. However, the high number of pastors and church leaders who have been targeted for assassination, forcible displacement and death threats in such a restricted region rather indicates a systematic targeting of civil society leaders who directly oppose the ethos and activities of the illegal armed groups.

In addition to the murders of these pastors and church leaders over the summer there have also been a number of massive displacements in the region. On June 27, around 200 families fled a hamlet in the area of Montelíbano, after a general threat against the population was issued by one of the armed groups followed by fighting between government troops and guerrillas. One day later on June 28, fights over territory between the Paisas/Rastrojos and the Águilas Negras resulted in the displacement of 62 families from the areas of Alto Viento, Solo Dios, Agua Viva and Ratón Medio in the region of Cadillo in the Department of Tierralta. On July 7, fighting between the FARC and the army in the Tierradentro area of Montelíbano Municipality caused the displacement of 50 families who headed to the district of Juan José in Puerto Libertador Municipality.

The national government appears to be paying little attention to the situation. There are also extremely worrying reports of collusion between the illegal armed groups and government

public security forces. In addition, there continue to be serious questions about the government's commitment to fighting the resurgence of the paramilitary groups, as a number of cases from 2007 and 2008 in the same region, have yet to be investigated. These cases also involved threats, forced displacement, attempted assassination and forced disappearances of church leaders, implicating the same paramilitary organisations. Unfortunately, the government's insistence that paramilitarism has been eradicated does nothing to encourage local populations that there is any real political will to deal with the problem. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the situation continues to worsen.

## **2. Recommendations**

### **2.1. CSW calls on the Colombia government:**

- To carry out full investigations into, and to bring to justice, those responsible for the assassinations of church leaders and pastors in the Cordoba region, in particular the most recent cases of Rafael Velasquez, Jhon Jairo Martinez and Marco Fidel Suárez Moreno;
- To offer effective protection to individual leaders and communities who have come under threat;
- To ensure that where victims have filed legal denunciations with local government officials that the information is kept in strict confidentiality, that prompt and proper investigations are carried out, and that victims and witnesses are provided with support and protection;
- To fully investigate claims of collusion between members of public security forces and illegal armed groups and to take strong measures where collusion is found to be occurring;
- To ensure that all community leaders in the region, particularly those involved in the process of reparations, are also afforded proper protection and publicly communicate full Government support for reparation programmes and right to return for displaced communities.

### **2.2. CSW calls on the European Union:**

- To push the Government of Colombia to carry out and implement the recommendations listed above;
- To implement the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and to raise these cases as a matter of urgent concern (see below for details) with the Colombian Government;
- To monitor the cases of those pastors and church leaders who have been assassinated and to push for proper investigations and legal prosecution where appropriate;
- To maintain pressure on the Colombian government to take effective measures to stamp out government corruption and collusion with illegal armed groups at local, regional and national levels, particularly in the Department of Córdoba.

### 3. List of Pastors and church leaders killed or under threat

#### 3.1. Pastor "A"

##### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Pastor "A"
<u>Wife:</u>	married with children
<u>When:</u>	September 2009
<u>What:</u>	threats, attempted abduction/assassination, displacement
<u>Responsible:</u>	paramilitaries

##### Details

In Autumn 2009, Pastor "A" reported receiving repeated threats from one paramilitary organisation accusing him of collaboration with another paramilitary organisation. In mid-September while travelling between towns by motorcycle he was intercepted and attacked by armed men. He struggled with the men and managed to flee but went into hiding the same day where he remains at present.

#### 3.2. Rafael Velasquez

##### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Pastor Rafael Velasquez
<u>Wife:</u>	married,
<u>Where:</u>	Marañonal, Montelibano Municipality, Cordoba
<u>When:</u>	6 September 2009
<u>What:</u>	assassination
<u>Responsible:</u>	presumed paramilitaries
<u>Church:</u>	Foursquare Gospel Church

##### Details

Pastor Rafael Velasquez was assassinated in his home at around 22:00 September 6, by three masked gunmen. The forty-one year pastor of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Marañonal, died instantly. The pastor was shot to death in front of his wife and six young members of his church who were meeting together in their home following a church service. According to his wife, he had not received any threats previous to the attack and she does not know why he was targeted. Since his assassination she has been displaced to another town.

#### 3.3. Marco Fidel Suárez Moreno

##### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Marco Fidel Suárez Moreno
<u>Wife:</u>	married, four children
<u>Where:</u>	Former paramilitary safe zone, Santa Marta, just outside the hamlets of Canutillal and Pueblo Cedro
<u>When:</u>	24 July 2009
<u>What:</u>	assassination
<u>Responsible:</u>	Águilas Negras paramilitaries
<u>Church:</u>	Galicia Church, a member of the AIEC.

Details: On 24 July at around 11:20am Marco Fidel Suárez Moreno was shot and killed by four armed men, believed to be members of the Aguilas Negras paramilitary group, riding on motorcycles. The assassination took place in the former paramilitary safe zone in Santa Marta department, just outside the hamlets of Canutillal and Pueblo Cedro

Marco Fidel, age 42, was a town councillor for Monteria. He had also been trained as an Equality Conciliator (Consiliador de Equidad) by the OAS-Support Mission for the Peace Process (MAPP-OEA) following the demobilisation process. He worked in farming and agriculture. He was a church leader at the Galicia AIEC Church in the hamlet of Nuevo Paraiso in the area of Santa Fe de Ralito. From 1998 to 2000 he had been a member of the Tierralta town council and acted as president of the Board of Community Action in the Santa Fe de Ralito and Las Aguaditas districts.

The murder of Marco Fidel took place one day after the assassination of Guillermo Ramos on July 24, in the Costa de Oro precinct of Tierralta Municipality. The murder took place on a farm that INCORA gave away to campesinos during the 1990s. However, after being resettled on the land, former AUC boss Carlos Castaño ordered the campesinos to care for cattle without payment. Later, Castaño gave away the land on which the farm was located to paramilitary chief, Salvatore Mancuso. Mancuso informed the campesinos that as the land was his, they would have to leave.

Following the demobilization process the families began to reclaim their land. With the support of the Reconciliation and Reparation Commission (CNRR) they managed to get it back, but were then subjected to threats, ordering them to vacate the land.

### 3.4. Jhon Jairo Martinez

#### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Jhon Jairo Martinez
<u>Wife:</u>	married, three young children
<u>Where:</u>	El Quindio, San Anterito, Monteria Municipality
<u>When:</u>	28 June 2009
<u>What:</u>	assassination
<u>Responsible:</u>	Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia paramilitary group
<u>Church:</u>	leader at Association of Evangelical Churches of the Caribbean (AIEC) church

Details: On 28 June at 20:00 four armed men, believed to be members of the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, arrived at the house of Jhon Jairo Martínez. When Jhon Jairo responded to their knock on the door, they requested that he lend them his motorcycle. When Jhon informed them that he could not because the motorcycle had no petrol, they then requested that his wife sell them a minute on her cell phone and that Jhon Jairo give them water. As Jhon Jairo was walking to the kitchen to get the water for them, they shot him. When his wife grabbed him, the men fired more shots at him and left. It is believed that a local cattle rancher who had threatened Jhon Jairo on multiple occasions was responsible for ordering the assassination.

Jhon Jairo, a leader at the AIEC church, lived with his family on El Quindio, a farm given in 1997 by INCORA (the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform, a government institute) to around 40 displaced families. The cattle rancher

believed to be behind the assassination, kept his cattle near El Quindio, which is located along the main road from Monteria to Tierralta, and had repeatedly threatened Jhon Jairo and other members of the community. Two families from the same community had already been forcibly displaced because of threats from the rancher.

Before he was killed, Jhon Jairo had informed the public prosecutor in Montería as well as a journalist from the *El Meridiano de Córdoba* newspaper about the threats. Members of the community comment that when he was not taken seriously, Jhon Jairo said that he would be believed when he was dead. Our partners report that they have not received any information to indicate that the prosecutor's office is investigating his murder or that *El Meridiano de Córdoba* has written anything on this denunciation-event.

Jhon Jairo was the brother of Jorge Vides Martínez, who was also threatened last year and had to be once again displaced. Jhon Jairo's wife, is the niece of Azaél Hernández, who was forcibly disappeared last year and whose extended family was subsequently forcibly displaced and are now relocated in Nueva Esperanza, Tierralta. (See Tierralta Cases Mini-briefing May 2009)

### 3.5. *Planeta Rica* pastors

#### **Basic facts**

Who: multiple pastors  
When: May 2009  
What: threats  
Responsible: Aguilas Negras Paramilitary group

Details: See Case of Pastor "B" below. On the same day, a number of pastors in the same town also received identical phone calls. In their case, however, they have decided, as a group, to stay and to carry on with their work.

### 3.6. Pastor "B"

#### **Basic facts**

Who: Pastor "B"  
Family: married, three children  
When: May 2009  
What: threats, forced displacement  
Responsible: Aguilas Negras Paramilitary group

Details: Pastor "B" received a phone call in May from a man who identified himself as representing the Águilas Negras. The man stated that he had some people that he wanted the pastor to look after. He informed the pastor that a car would come for him and would take him to get these people.

When the pastor indicated that he would not cooperate with this plan, the man told him he had another option: to purchase a card for a mobile telephone to be given to the paramilitary group. The pastor once again refused to cooperate with the paramilitary group.

In response the man told him that if he was unwilling to cooperate with the paramilitary group, he would be considered a military target and that he should leave town immediately.

The pastor and his family, fearful for their lives, fled that same afternoon to another city. The family is particularly sensitive to these kinds of threats, as three of Pastor “B’s” brothers were assassinated by the AUC paramilitary group in 1993 and 1994. One of them was also a pastor.

### 3.7. Pastor “C”

#### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Pastor “C”
<u>When:</u>	May 2009
<u>What:</u>	death threats
<u>Responsible:</u>	Aguilas Negras Paramilitary Group

Details: On 27 May, Pastor “C” received a phone call from a man who identified himself as representing the Águilas Negras. The man told the pastor that he had some “individuals in difficulty” who he wanted the pastor and the church to look after. He told the pastor that there was a car waiting a block away from the church, ready to take him to the location of these individuals.

The pastor told the man that he and the church would be unable to do this and that they should contact the Red Cross or another similar organisation. The man on the telephone informed the pastor that if he refused to collaborate, he would be considered a military target. After a few more words, he hung up.

### 3.8. Church leader “D”

#### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Church Leader “D”
<u>When:</u>	May 2009
<u>What:</u>	assassination
<u>Responsible:</u>	presumed paramilitary groups operating in the region

Details: One night in May at 22:00, while “D” was playing chess with some friends at his place of work, armed men in a car pulled up and fired at him four times, killing him instantly.

“D” was the uncle of the regional coordinator of a high profile human rights defender in the general region. He was married and had six children, ranging in age from 7 to 22 years old.

His wife reported in September that she had received anonymous threats by telephone asking if she “wanted to leave her children as orphans”. The older children have also received anonymous threats.

He was a small businessman and had maintained a stall in the town’s central market for 15 years. He had also organized a small businessmen’s association, which he was elected to lead at various times. He unsuccessfully ran for City Council a few years ago. He was an active member at his church, and according to his pastor, had played a critical role in the founding of a new church on the



outskirts of town eight years ago. He and his family, according to the pastor, had worked tirelessly to expand the work of the church in the neighbourhood in which it was located.

### 3.9. Pastor “E”

#### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Pastor “E”
<u>Family:</u>	married, eight children
<u>When:</u>	December 2008, February 2009, March 2009
<u>What:</u>	assassination, threats, forced displacement
<u>Responsible:</u>	unclear, illegal armed groups operating in the area

Details: In December 2008, the son-in-law of Pastor “E” was assassinated.

In February, the pastor heard rumours that his sons’ names were on a list of individuals marked for assassination by one of the illegal armed groups operating in the area. However, the sons knew they were not guilty of anything, so apparently the family did not pay much attention to the rumours. In February, armed men came to the house, asking for one of the sons by name. They informed him that he had until 6:00am the next day to leave the town, or he would be killed. They returned the next morning, with guns in hand, but the son had left.

The armed group then sent more men to the pastor’s home and informed them that all of his sons, and his son-in-law, would have to leave or they would be killed.

The entire family, numbering around 20 individuals, fled to the relative safety of a nearby town. The pastor’s adult children and their families did not feel safe there, so have moved on to a larger city.

The family was forced to leave everything behind and one daughter, who was in her third semester of university, has been unable to continue her studies. Their economic situation is extremely precarious and those remaining in the nearby town still do not feel entirely safe.

In June, three months after the displacement of Pastor “E” and his family, a general threat was issued by paramilitary groups operating in the region against the population. This, along with fighting between guerrilla groups and government forces, resulted in the massive displacement of 200 families.

### 3.10. Pastor “F”

#### Basic facts

<u>Who:</u>	Pastor “F”
<u>Family:</u>	married, five children
<u>When:</u>	December 2008 and January 2009
<u>What:</u>	Kidnapping, threats
<u>Responsible:</u>	Aguilas Negras Paramilitary group

Details: Early one the morning in December 2008, Pastor “F” found a letter on his front door. The letter, which had the insignia of the paramilitary group the

Águilas Negras, demanded that the pastor pay them a sum of five million pesos (around £1500) and provide them with a motorcycle within three days. The pastor took the situation to the church leaders and after praying about it, decided that he would not cooperate. After these events, a few local community leaders (not related to the church) carried out some investigations into who was behind the extortion attempt. They spoke to a number of high level leaders of the Águilas Negras who also told them that the pastor “should look after himself because someone might want to harm him.”

On 28 January 2009, at 19:00, the pastor left his house to buy a soft drink at the shop next door. As he went out, a stranger called out to him and told him, “to come with him, not to call anyone or make any kind of noise because he was going to die that night.”

The man took the pastor to a dark alley where two men were waiting. They tried to tie up the pastor but he protested saying, “If you are going to kill me and there is no way I can escape, why do you need to tie me up?”

They took him to a field on the outskirts of town, where they pointed a gun at him and beat and insulted him. When the pastor asked why they wanted to kill him and who had ordered the assassination, they replied that he was a “hard man,” had collaborated with the mafia and that they were going to kill him for being an informant.

However, after a two-hour discussion, the men surprisingly agreed that they had no good reason to kill the pastor. They told him he should literally “get lost,” and he fled.

When he returned to his home he shared the situation with his family and the church, and although some advised the family to leave the area immediately, the pastor replied, “We trust in God, I am sure there is no valid reason for killing me.”

Eight days later, the men returned and told the pastor that, as far as they were concerned, everything was okay and there was no problem. However, they warned him to be careful because the person who had sent them wanted to harm him. Since then he has not received any communication from them.

Some investigations were carried out, and a number of the illegal armed groups which operate in the area were approached but none took responsibility for the threats against the pastor. This is the third time that the life of this pastor has been threatened and they are taking the situation very seriously.

It has caused the family great distress, particularly the children, who repeatedly ask, “Daddy, are they going to kill you?”

Pastor “F” has said that he will continue leading his church, trusting in God to protect him. He believes that unless God allows it, no one will be able to harm him and says he will stay in the town until God wills otherwise.

### 3.11. Pastor Manuel Miranda Diez

#### **Basic facts**

<u>Who:</u>	Pastor Manuel Miranda Diez
<u>Children:</u>	Five children, three of whom are adults. Two children still live at home: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Luisa, 14</li><li>• Manuel, 6 months</li></ul>
<u>Where:</u>	Montelíbano, Córdoba Department, Colombia
<u>When:</u>	17 November 2008, 20 November 2008, 17 December 2008
<u>What:</u>	Extortion, threats, attempted assassination, forced displacement
<u>Responsible:</u>	Unclear, an illegal armed group operating in the area
<u>Church:</u>	Foursquare Gospel Church

Details: On the night of 17 November, a man approached Pastor Miranda just outside his home, which is located next to the church building. The man identified himself as speaking on behalf of an armed group operating in the area. He informed the pastor that the armed group was inviting the pastor to collaborate with them by turning over 30% of all church income/offerings or, alternatively, five million pesos, to the group. When Pastor Miranda indicated that the church would not “collaborate”, the man responded by threatening him and warning him to leave Montelíbano within 24 hours.

On 20 November, the pastor received a telephone call, threatening the family if the pastor did not comply with the demands of the armed group. Over the next few days, strange men were observed walking back and forth in front of the house. In addition, a member of the church received a message, passed on to the pastoral team, which stated that if the pastor refused to collaborate they had “three grenades for him.”

On 17 December at 4:00am, a live grenade was thrown at the house, while the family was asleep inside. The grenade caused extensive damage to the front of the house, destroying the door and windows, but miraculously no one in the family was hurt.

Following the grenade attack, however, the family and the pastoral team made the decision to leave Montelíbano for their own safety. The family is now in another city and is struggling to make ends meet.