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COLOMBIA | Church Leaders Receive Death Threats

Five church leaders in the north of Colombia received death threats from neo-paramilitary groups, apparently because of their pastoral care for victims of human rights violations.

Three Presbyterian pastors, a Lutheran and a Mennonite pastor were named as targets in a threat that was printed and circulated in the name of the Black Eagles neo-paramilitary group on Jan. 11.

Rev. Milton Mejía, Rev. Jairo Barriga and church elder Germán Zárate from the Colombian Presbyterian Church, who work in the Atlantic Coast city of Barranquilla, were among a list of names on the threat that was issued earlier this month.

The threat states: "...if you believe that because you work with the son of a b*** gringos and the thieving churches that they are going to save you piece of ***, we are right behind you... We know where you live and your organizations are also in our sights... Barranquilla churches... know that we are coming for you."

A public statement issued by the Anglican Church in the Caribbean, The Presbytery of the Coast (Presbyterian Church in Colombia), the Mennonite Churches in Barranquilla and Peace and Justice Service in Colombia, stated they believe these church leaders have been targeted because of their ministries with victims of violence, as well as in peacemaking and reconciliation: "We believe these threats to be religious persecution as they are clearly threatening the development and free practice of our pastoral and humanitarian work with those who suffer the consequences of the armed conflict, and our participation in peace making for Colombia as the Gospel requires of us."

Church leaders have long been a target of armed groups on all sides of the internal conflict in Colombia, which involves far-left guerrilla groups the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army, far right neo-paramilitary groups which the government refers to as 'Criminal bands', and Colombian state forces. While guerrilla groups tend to target church leaders because of an ideological opposition to religion, neo-paramilitary groups often view church leaders as opposing their aims because their message often runs counter to the neo-paramilitary groups' objectives.

Religious groups and human rights organizations within and outside Colombia have called for protection for those under threat, and for the government to investigate and prosecute threats and attacks on human rights defenders.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We are deeply concerned for the welfare of Rev. Milton Mejía, Rev. Jairo Barriga and Elder Germán Zárate, as

well as for all the others named in the threat issued by the Black Eagles. While we are pleased with the progress made in the ongoing peace dialogues between the FARC and the Colombian government, we repeat our call to the Colombian government to take serious steps to eradicate paramilitary groups and to address the threat they pose to human rights and to stability in Colombia. In the meantime, we call on the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States to raise this case as a matter of urgency with the Colombian government, and to monitor closely the welfare of the men and women who have been threatened.”