

Defamations in Colombian and International Media Threaten Human Rights Defenders

Bogota, 18 January, 2010 - A recent string of newspaper articles in the international and Colombian national media attacking Peace Brigades International (PBI) and the organisations we accompany in Colombia is cause for great concern. In an editorial published by the *Wall Street Journal* on 14 December 2009 (both print and electronic versions), the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP), Jesuit priest and human rights advocate Father Javier Giraldo, human rights advocates Eduar Lancho and Gloria Cuartas, and PBI are accused of having ties with the leftist guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

That same week, following the assassinations of Manuel Moya, Graciano Blandon, and Blandon's son, all residents of the Curbaradó river basin in north-west Colombia where PBI provides protective accompaniment, a number of articles appeared in the national press accusing CIJP, Father Javier Giraldo, human rights lawyer Ivan Cepeda, and PBI of masterminding the assassinations. The high volume of articles, and the striking similarity of discourse, tone, and language used, are extremely disturbing, and allude to an organised and intentional campaign aimed at discrediting the Colombian human rights defenders and PBI.

This series of defamations is directly linked to the work performed by these organisations in Urabá, a region characterised by a history of violence, illegal land appropriation, and displacement. The Colombians accused in the articles actively work for truth, justice and reparations for the numerous victims of these crimes, and what they all have in common is their involvement in judicial proceedings against the 17th Brigade of the Colombian Army.

PBI is concerned for the possible security implications these public statements, editorial columns, and articles could pose for our volunteers on the ground in Colombia, and for the distorted image of PBI that they seek to propagate. However, we believe that PBI is not the direct target in these situations. Rather, it is the organisations that we accompany. Delegitimizing PBI's work weakens our accompaniment and our capacity to provide desperately-needed protection to human rights advocates, exposing them to possible attacks and intimidation and dramatically impeding their ability to safely continue their work. PBI has been accompanying Colombian human rights lawyers, relatives of the forcibly disappeared, victims' organisations, displaced communities, peace communities and journalists for 15 years.

It is our sincere hope that the instigators of this campaign stop making false accusations that could seriously affect the physical safety of PBI volunteers and the organisations and the communities that we accompany.

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