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PBI COLOMBIA

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Focos de Interés

*Focos de Interés is a monthly newsletter that highlights different aspects of the human rights situation in Colombia, from the perspective of PBI's work and objectives. This publication is for **limited distribution** only and may not be re-produced without prior permission.*

November 2007

Dear Sir/Madam:

Greetings from the Colombia Project of Peace Brigades International (PBI). Through this monthly newsletter, we would like to share our concerns, which are based primarily on eyewitness accounts gathered during our daily accompaniment of persons, organizations and displaced communities whose physical safety is threatened because of their work in defence of human rights.

Violent aggression towards Yolanda Becerra Vega, Director of the OFP

PBI would like to express its concern at the recent attack on Yolanda Becerra Vega, director of the OFP (*Organización Femenina Popular – Women's Grassroots Movement*), an organisation accompanied by PBI in Barrancabermeja.

On Sunday 4 November 2007 at 7.30 am, two men, armed, hooded and dressed in civilian clothes, entered Yolanda Becerra Vega's apartment, threatened her while they overturned and destroyed its contents and tried to remove her computer's hard drive. They put a gun to her head, warning her: *'The story's over, you bastard – you have 48 hours to get out. If you don't, we'll kill your family. You won't escape us.'* Shortly before this, strangers entered the apartment building of Jacqueline Rojas Castañeda, a manager in the same organisation, and blocked the lock of her apartment door from the outside, preventing her from leaving.¹

The OFP has been carrying out work with grassroots sectors in defence of life and women's rights for over 35 years, denouncing human rights violations in the region. Following the detention of 4 recognised human rights defenders from the ACVC (*Asociación Campesina del Valle Cimitarra – The Cimitarra Valley Peasant Farmers Association*) in September, Yolanda took action to establish their whereabouts². As a result of this action she was branded as a guerrilla in an anonymous threat³.

¹ OFP press release: Acción Urgente. Incursión de hombres armados en vivienda de Yolanda Becerra e intimidación a Jacqueline Rojas de la OFP y Juan Carlos Galvis de SINALTRAINAL, (Urgent Action: Yolanda Becerra's home raided by armed men and intimidation of Jacqueline Rojas of the OFP and Juan Carlos Galvis of SINALTRAINAL) 4 November 2007.

² Letter from Yolanda Becerra Vega to Francisco Santos Calderón, Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia, 25 October 2007.

³ Idem.

Previously, in September 2007 during the testimony of the paramilitary leader Rodrigo Pérez, alias Julián Bolívar, before the Justice and Peace Unit of the *Fiscalía General de la Nación* (Public Prosecutor's Office), he smeared various civil society organisations in Magdalena Medio, including the OFP, accusing them of aiding the guerrilla movement⁴, and drawing particular attention, publicly, to Yolanda Becerra.

The MICMM (*Mesa Internacional de Complementariedad del Magdalena Medio* -the Magdalena Medio International Complementarity Forum) - a coordinating group of international agencies working in the region – stated in its letter to Colombia's Vice-President that this type of accusation caused great anxiety and impeded human rights work.⁵ The MICMM is still awaiting the office's reply.

Already in July 2007 a threat had arrived at the OFP's office via E-mail, signed by the *Bloque Central Águilas Negras Colombia* (Black Eagles Central Bloc - Colombia), in which a number of civil society organisations in Barrancabermeja were declared 'military targets', including the OFP.⁶

This series of acts of harassment testifies to the continued existence of a strategy of persecution of human rights defenders. PBI wishes to express its grave concern for the security and physical integrity of Yolanda Becerra Vega and the other members of the OFP, and for the continued ability of human rights defenders to work in Barrancabermeja.

PBI calls on the international community to intercede, in order to ensure that concrete measures are adopted to guarantee the life and security of Yolanda Becerra, an emblematic figure for the social and human rights movement in Barrancabermeja and the region as a whole. Her protection is a key element in the continued existence of the social movement there. It will serve to provide encouragement to all the OFP's members and other organisations. PBI calls on the international community to monitor the situation closely to ensure that the Colombian state uses all the mechanisms at its disposal to clarify the facts surrounding the above incidents.

We wish to thank you for your attention and support in defence of human rights.

PBI Colombia

⁴ Press release by the ETTTDDHH (Espacio de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de Derechos Humanos de Barrancabermeja – Barrancabermeja Human Rights Workers' Forum) : Urgent Action, 13 September 2007.

⁵ Letter from the MICMM to Francisco Santos, Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia, 4 October, 2007.

⁶ Urgent Action by ETTTDDHH, 2 August 2007.