

PRESS RELEASE

AN APPEAL FOR REFLECTION ON LIVING IN HARMONY AND PEACE

A message to the public from the Diocese of Barrancabermeja and Magangué and the Development and Peace Program of Magdalena Medio.

On April 10 a death threat appeared on the Internet targeting individuals and organizations we work with in Magdalena Medio on issues such as integral human development and lasting peace. The threat was signed by Comandante Camilo of the northern bloc of the Águilas Negras [Black Eagles], “long-time combatants of the United Self-defense Forces of Colombia.”

The message describes the parish priest of Regidor municipality (southern Bolívar) as “an obstacle to the municipal government,” the parishioners of Tiquisio and Arenal as “war workers,” and members of the Development and Peace Program of Magdalena Medio as “perpetrators of criminal acts against democratic security,” in those population centers as well as in the municipalities of Morales and Aguachica. It also mentions the Federación de Agricultores y Mineros [Miners and Farmers Federation] of southern Bolívar, and the human rights group SEMBRAR. All of these will be “military targets” in an “annihilation plan” in which “they will be exterminated one by one as they appear on the list.”

The Magangué diocese led by Bishop Leonardo Gómez Serna, whose priests have been threatened with death, the Barrancabermeja diocese led by Bishop Jaime Prieto Amaya, president of the Corporación de Desarrollo y Paz para el Magdalena Medio CDPMM [Development and Peace Corporation for Magdalena Medio], Father Francisco de Roux Rengifo, S.J., Director of the Development and Peace Program of Magdalena Medio PDPMM, and their staff express their emphatic repudiation of these threats, which endanger personal integrity and undermine people’s right to fully exercise their freedoms and pursue their legitimate aspirations.

We reject::

1. All forms of illegal authority
2. All forms of violence regardless of the source, manifested as:
 - Forced disappearance
 - Kidnapping
 - Extrajudicial executions
 - Massacres
 - Forced displacement
 - Firing squads
 - Torture
 - Intimidation and terror
 - Antipersonnel mines

3. All forms of relations or alliances between the State and illegal groups. They (the Águilas Negras) are the last ones in a position to claim to uphold the government and democratic security.
4. In sum, we reject the violent deaths of over 2000 people in the region since 1986. In our own particular case, we have already buried 28 men and women colleagues of the PDPMM program who were cruelly murdered.

We reaffirm our intention to:

1. Collaborate in the construction of a region that respects the life and dignity of the sons and daughters of God, who is the wellspring of their fundamental and inalienable rights.
2. Recover the cultural identity of these peoples; protect their territories and their ownership of the land as peasants with deep roots in these regions; ensure their food security; and fight poverty and exclusion through new forms of development and coherent and consistent initiatives (such as peasant farms, protection of rivers, woodlands and native species, etc.).
3. Implement values-centered education based on an ethic of the common good that will permeate political and economic institutions with transparency to fight corruption in its manifold and perverse manifestations..
4. Collectively seek truth and justice by equipping communities with concrete tools for this purpose (community radios, citizen oversight committees, a stronger social fabric, etc.).
5. In sum, defend and promote a Social Rule of Law, the fruit of consensus among citizens, men and women alike, to ensure that all people have equal access to the conditions necessary for a life with dignity.

We request the following of the civilian, military and police authorities and the Public Ministry:

1. Special protection for these peoples who are working for development with social justice and whose path towards peaceful and sovereign living is under threat.
2. The investigation of these crimes and the identification and punishment of those responsible.

We appeal to businesses and workers to join together in a process of reflection and discernment in the quest for solutions to put an end to such barbarity.

We want our colleagues, men and women, leaders and priests, and members of the organizations who have been explicitly singled out by the Águilas Negras to feel that we are with them, their families and loved ones. At one with them in risk and uncertainty, we express our fraternity with the victims of all of the perpetrators who have spilled blood and sowed terror among us.

“The truth will set us free” and “be not afraid,” our Lord Jesus Christ has told us repeatedly. We trust in God and we trust in the people of Magdalena Medio who have already wrought changes in these lands where we were once dispersed in our uncertainty and where we now walk together despite those who wish to intimidate and stop us. We are not going to leave this region, nor will we abandon the parishes or halt the projects. We will not desist in the struggle for the land and we will not remove our support from the organizations and community groups. We will not slow down in our promotion of humanitarian spaces and peasant organizations, of cultural spaces and community

radio networks, or of women and youth. We travel this path knowing that peace must be built without violence in the midst of conflict and that we would have to face risks and pay the price of building it. This is why we will go forward.

We have forged this path thanks to the solidarity of institutions of the Colombian government itself, the European Union through the Peace Laboratory, the United Nations, and countries such as Japan, Switzerland and Canada. They are familiar with our motives, our actions, and the way we invest resources. We trust that they will have the consistent and committed solidarity to remain by our side in the hard times, a solidarity exemplified by the international peace volunteers present in the region.

May Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace, accompany us on this road to salvation.

+JORGE LEONARDO GÓMEZ SERNA
Bishop of Magangué

+JAIME PRIETO AMAYA
Bishop of Barrancabermeja
President of CDPMM

Fr. FRANCISCO DE ROUX RENGIFO, S.J.
Director of PDPMM

Barrancabermeja, April 15, 2008