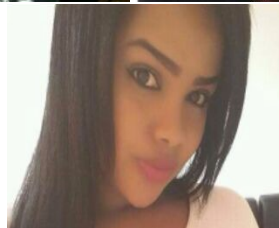
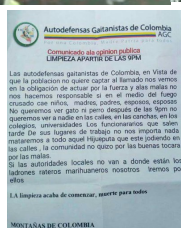




URGENT ACTION

YOUTHS IN VILLA RICA, CAUCA IN GRAVE DANGER

Five murdered and five injured in the past two weeks



Villa Rica, Cauca, Southwest Colombia, 8 May 2017.

Paramilitarism, small-scale drugs trafficking¹, and armed political control create chaos in Villa Rica, Cauca. The victims are between 16 and 25 years old

We, the undersigned human rights and social organisations, both national and international, denounce the grave human rights situation in the municipality of Villa Rica, Cauca. This situation is due to the strengthening of paramilitary groups and the appearance of a threatening leaflet, signed by the so-called 'Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia'², which continue to sow terror, anxiety and chaos in this

¹ 'Small scale drugs trafficking' as used here refers to both the movement and dealing of relatively small quantities of illegal drugs for use in the country, rather than for export.

² Rough translation of the name would be 'Gainist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia'. The name makes reference to Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a hero figure on the Colombian left who was assassinated in 1948. It is thought that the group use Gaitan in order to confuse public opinion over their political orientation and their targeting of activists and social leaders.



municipality in the north of Cauca department, as well as in other regions around the country. During the past two weeks the actions of these groups has resulted in five deaths and five injured.

The youth crisis in Villa Rica has been exacerbated by the lack of employment opportunities and difficulties in accessing education at secondary, technical and university levels. Unemployment, racism, poverty and exclusion are the main obstacles now stopping the tide of violence being reversed. Rather than an increased budget for security forces, the town needs increased employment opportunities and real political participation, as well as the right to a process which seeks their free prior and informed consent for projects which affect the social, political and economic life in the town.

The facts:

1. On 20 April 2017, a leaflet signed by the 'Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia' appeared in several neighbourhoods of Villa Rica. In the leaflet the group announced a new wave of murders:

'Social cleansing from 9pm: The Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, given that the population doesn't want to heed our call, find ourselves obliged to use force and do things the hard way, we will not be held responsible if children, mothers, fathers, husbands and wives fall in the cross fire. We don't even want to see cats and dogs in the streets after 9pm - nobody should be in the streets, on playing fields, in schools or universities. We don't care if people leave their workplaces late, we will kill any son of a bitch on the streets, the community didn't want it the easy way, so we have to do it the hard way. If the local authorities don't go to where the thieves and stoners are then we will go for them.'

A few days after the appearance of the leaflet, a statement appeared on the supposed official web page of the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia saying *'the leaflet that is circulating its false, we have never released a leaflet in which we announce social cleansing'*. Denials of responsibility for the threats and attacks around the country is part of the strategy of impunity used by the illegal armed groups in order to distract from their responsibility, and in order to create confusion and chaos. Contrary to the claim that the leaflet was fake, since its release the town of Villa Rica has suffered a wave of murders and attacks.

2. Between 21 April and 4 May 2017, 10 youths in Villa Rica have been victims of murders, attacks and persecution committed by armed men on motorbikes. Five of these have died, and five were seriously injured.

It is important to note that human rights organisations have been making efforts to establish the identities and further details of all of those who have been killed, and to understand the modus



operandi of the perpetrators of these crimes committed in the midst of the chaos in Villa Rica since the appearance of the leaflet. This task has not been easy, given that these cases have been totally silenced, as with others which have been occurring in Cauca and Valle del Cauca. So far, we have been able to confirm the following series of events:

1. In the last week of March 2017 (prior to the appearance of the leaflet), **BREIMAR BALANTA SERRANO** was murdered in the La Palma neighbourhood of Villa Rica. The murder was carried out by two men travelling on a motorbike who shot the young man.
2. On Saturday 22 April a young man was shot dead in Felix Colorado central park in Villa Rica. The young man, whose identity is still unconfirmed, is thought to have come from the nearby town of Puerto Tejada. The murder was carried out by two men travelling on a motorbike who shot the young man.
3. On Friday 27 April a young man thought to be from the rural areas surrounding Villa Rica was found murdered in the outskirts of The town, near the Valencia bridge. He had been shot three times. We are working to establish the identity of this young man.
4. At 4.25am on Monday 1 May 2017, in the 'los Almendros' neighbourhood, **Jose Luis Mejia** was murdered. The murder was carried out by two men travelling on a motorbike who shot Jose Luis to death.
5. At approximately 7.30pm on Monday 1 May, two unidentified individuals on a motorbike and apparently with their faces masked, opened fire in a group of youths at the 'los Mangullos' corner. The youths fled, however one of the bullets reached 19 year old **JHOJAN FELIPE MERA LOBOA**, who died at 4pm on 2 May in the Valle de Lili hospital in the city of Cali. In the same incident 4 other youths were injured with bullet wounds.
6. On 3 May 2017, according to reports from inhabitants of Villa Rica, armed men attacked the wake of **JHOJAN FELIPE MERA LOBOA** and opened fire, causing chaos. A woman in attendance at the wake was injured in the attack. She is yet to be identified.
7. On 4 May 2017, during the funeral of **JHOJAN FELIPE MERA LOBOA**, family and friends went to the house of Jhojan Felipe's mother. Whilst there, two unidentified individuals on a motorbike drove past the house, then drove back and opened fire upon those present. In the ensuing chaos a gunfight took place, in which one of the attackers was injured and the other escaped. Inhabitants report that the police arrived within five minutes, opened fire and took the injured attacker away. The chaos means that reports of the order of event are confused. The identity of the attackers on the motorbike is unknown.



Background



1. On 10 October 2016 Villa Rica hosted the International camp for young social leaders with the participation of 22 countries. The initiative was led by Ñanga Productions, the JAS International Collective, and supported by the UNESCO Friends Corporation. The objective of the event was to empower young people and to create a global network of young peace activists. In this event the youth leader **GILMAR ALEJANDRO POSSU ARRECHE**, from Villa Rica, played a leading role. The conclusions of the event emphasised the need for youth to be involved in making decisions and policies which affect their lives, security and future. It was decided that the next event will be held in the Dominican Republic, where attendees will discuss progress in terms of community peace building and opportunities for participation being provided by states.
2. On 8 December 2016 Villa Rica Afro-descendent youth leader **GILMAR ALEJANDRO POSSU ARRECHE** was murdered. Together with other leaders and youth in Villa Rica GILMAR was involved in creating several initiatives which were presented to the Villa Rica Mayor, YENNI NAIR GÓMEZ, with whom he met on several occasions. GILMAR was one of the well-known youth leaders in Villa Rica, and always tried to find alternatives for the teenagers and youths of the town. His work included a comprehensive prevention proposal which would work on the themes of culture, education and work.



The community of Villa Rica is witness to how it is the youth who continue to be the principal victims of the conflict, and the state authorities responsible for investigation and control offer no results with regards to the causes of the chaos which the municipality is currently experiencing.

It is important to note that one of the common strategies of these armed groups is to create chaos and economic dependency, as well as using low-level drug trafficking as a means to co-opting young people to their project of territorial control.. The situation in Villa Rica clearly shows the re-appearance of the strategy of 'invisible borders' which communities in other areas such as Buenaventura have been subjected to. The situation has been ignored by the national and international media.

As human rights organisations we manifest our deep concern at the situation in Villa Rica, which is yet another demonstration of how paramilitary groups have implemented a strategy of territorial control and expansion in several regions of Colombia during this current context of the implementation of the peace agreement between the government and the FARC guerrillas, and negotiations between the government and ELN guerrillas.

TAKE ACTION:

We request that you urgently direct communications to the Colombian authorities in order to demand preventative and protective measures in defence of the life and wellbeing of the youth of Villa Rica. We request that the Colombian state's organisms of investigation provide a report of the actions which have been undertaken in order to clarify events and the prevent further violence against the youth of Villa Rica.

In the UK please write to the Colombian Embassy:
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