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A C T I O N A L E R T

Action Alert is a publication that calls attention to critical security situations affecting the persons, organizations and communities, accompanied by Peace Brigades International (PBI), whose work in the defence of human rights results in threats to their personal safety and to the work itself. This publication is of limited distribution and cannot be reproduced without prior authorization.

Bogotá, 16 January 2012

Death threat at gunpoint against member of CREDHOS

PBI expresses its profound concern regarding the threat received by Abelardo Sánchez Serrano, member of the board of directors of the Regional Corporation for Human Rights Defence (CREDHOS), on 13 January 2012 in Barrancabermeja. As reported to the Attorney General's office, two men on a high-speed motorcycle intimidated, reproached and threatened Abelardo Sánchez with a gun, telling him that he should "stop denigrating the armed forces, we already have a son of a bitch guerrilla from Credhos in jail and if it's necessary to take care of the rest, well we'll do so to shut them up; and before leaving, they said that he had seventy-two hours to leave the city."¹

CREDHOS was formed in the city of Barrancabermeja and focuses its work on training and education about human rights and International Humanitarian Law, and on collecting formal complaints regarding human rights abuses and crimes against humanity committed by presumed paramilitaries and members of the Armed Forces, particularly cases of extrajudicial executions, in the region. PBI has accompanied CREDHOS since arriving in Colombia in 1994.

Since its formation, CREDOS and its members have been subject to threats and murders: between 1991 and 1992 six active members were killed, other members were forced into exile in the 90s, and since that time threats and assaults against members of the board of directors have continued. Of particular note are the nine threats received in 2008 via email and traditional mail signed by alleged paramilitaries, and the 12 death threats between 2009 and 2011 against members of CREDHOS and other social organizations in the region as a result of their human rights and victims' defence work.²

Since September 2010, David Ravelo Crespo, spokesperson for CREDHOS as well for as the social movement in Barrancabermeja, has been held in jail facing prosecution. Since his incarceration, PBI has been alerting the international community about this concerning case against a recognized human rights defender.³ Since his detention, David Ravelo Crespo has suffered a series of direct threats and harassment.⁴

PBI concurs with the statement of Christian Salazar, former representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: "Given what we have observed in the regions, we affirm once again that human rights defenders continue to find themselves in a worrying situation of vulnerability and we call on the Colombian State to increase its efforts to guarantee that they can carry out their labour free of threats and risks."⁵

This latest threat against Abelardo Sánchez coincides with the official announcement, by CREDHOS and other social organizations in the Magdalena Medio region, of the commemoration of the La Rochela massacre, to take place on 18 January 2012 in La Rochela. Twenty-four hours before receiving the threat, Abelardo Sánchez served as spokesperson in a press conference about the commemoration.⁶

The La Rochela massacre took place in Simacota municipality (Santander Department) in 1989. Twelve of fifteen court officials who were investigating crimes committed in Magdalena Medio by paramilitaries and members of the Armed Forces (a case known as “the 19 shopkeepers”) were killed.⁷ In 2007, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a decision against the Colombian State for the La Rochela massacre. In early January 2012, the Colombian Constitutional Court decreed urgent protection measures for the surviving massacre victims, citing the real risk for the victims and pointed out that the State had not duly provided for their protection.⁸

It is important to note that in November 2011 PBI alerted to events related to the Mapiripán massacre and the effect of public statements by State officials, including President Juan Manuel Santos, on massacre victims and the lawyers’ organizations that represent them.⁹ In this case, PBI expressed its profound concern about the implications of delegitimizing victims and human rights lawyers. Similarly worrisome are the effects that different forms of attacks against persons seeking truth, justice and reparation, like the threat against Abelardo Sánchez of CREDHOS, can have for the elucidation of human rights violations and crimes against humanity.

Finally, it is important to note the lack concrete protection measures for the members of CREDHOS, whose risk was recognized by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights when it granted preventative measures to the organization in 2000.

Given this situation of grave risk, PBI asks the International Community to urge the Colombia State:

- To investigate the threat in order to sanction those responsible and to guarantee that the events are not repeated;
- To implement protection measures, agreed upon with CREDHOS, to protect the lives of Abelardo Sánchez and the other members of CREDHOS;
- That President Juan Manuel Santos publicly supports the human rights, victims’ and lawyers’ organizations that seek truth, justice and reparation, particularly those that work on cases against State agents;
- That high-ranking government officials, particularly the President, express public support for commemorative acts or other initiatives by victims’ or social organizations related to emblematic cases of human rights abuses, with the purpose of publicly supporting the search for truth and reparation for victims.

Similarly, PBI requests that the International Community:

- Publicly condemns any threat or act of aggression against human rights defenders or victims reclaiming their rights;
- Demonstrates public support for the work of CREDHOS;
- Highlights its support of CREDHOS through visits to its headquarters in Barrancabermeja;
- Accompanies the victims and human rights organizations in commemorative acts of emblematic cases, like that of the La Rochela massacre.

PBI appreciates your continued support for our work to protect human rights defenders and displaced communities.

PBI Colombia

1. CREDHOS, “Hostigamiento y amenaza de muerte contra Abelardo Sánchez, defensor de derechos humanos de Credhos”, 13 January 2012.

2. Ibid.

3. PBI Colombia, *Focus of Interest*: Detention and criminalization of David Ravelo Crespo, human rights defender, 17 September 2010.

4. PBI Colombia, Informative Bulletin no.16, “More death threats against David Ravelo Crespo of CREDHOS”, September 2010.

5. Speech by the Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Christian Salazar Volkmann, Human Rights Defender Forum, 13 December 2011, <http://www.hchr.org.co/publico/pronunciamientos/ponencias/ponencias.php3?cod=142&cat=24>.

6. CREDHOS, “Hostigamiento y amenaza de muerte contra Abelardo Sánchez, defensor de derechos humanos de Credhos”, 13 January 2012.

7. Historical Memory Group of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR), “La Rochela: Memorias de un crimen contra la justicia”, 2010.

8. *El Espectador*, “Ordenan protección para familiares de víctimas de masacre de La Rochela”, 10 de enero de 2012.

9. PBI Colombia, “*Action Alert*: Statements regarding the Mapiripán massacre case delegitimize victims and human rights defenders”, 8 November 2011.