

via fax 011 57 1 596 0631

President Juan Manuel Santos
President of Colombia

via Fax: 011 57 1 266 1003

Juan Carlos Pinzón
Minister of Defense of Colombia

April 12, 2015

Dear Sirs:

We are deeply concerned for the safety of **Marlene Benitez, her family**, and other **members of the Pedeguita Mansilla Community Council** in Riosucio Municipality, Chocó Department, after armed men attacked them in their homes. Since the late 1990s Afro-descendant communities of the Curvaradó River Basin in Chocó have been under threat. Large corporate economic interests have sought to develop large-scale African palm and cattle ranching projects within the lands recognized as part of their collective land titles.

On the evening of March 18, scores of armed men, most of them hooded, arrived at the home of Marlene Benitez. Some of the men fired their weapons indiscriminately, destroyed some of the community members' houses and stole their cattle, food and tools. The armed men beat and injured Marlene Benitez's son, her neighbor **Felipe Triana** and two other men. They then forced them together with Marlene Benitez and her four-year old granddaughter on to a truck and took them to the police post in Belén de Bajirá. Marlene Benitez cried for help, but the police refused to intervene or to detain the men. The community members were finally released and sought medical attention for those injured in Belén de Bajirá.

In October 2013 Marlene Benítez and other members of the community returned to Pedeguita Mansilla, which they had been forced to abandon 16 years prior, having been forcibly displaced by paramilitaries (cf our letter of Oct 26, 2013). In 2014 the Ministry of Defense blocked a request for precautionary measures for the Pedeguita Mansilla community that had been requested by the state's Land Restitution Unit. On March 6, 2015, a request for precautionary measures supported by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman was rejected by a land restitution judge in Quibdó, Chocó Department, arguing that there was no apparent threat.

For these reasons we **strongly urge** that you

- provide effective protection for Marlene Benitez, her son, her granddaughter, Felipe Triana and other members of the Pedeguita Mansilla Community Council, in accordance with their wishes;
- order a full and impartial investigation into paramilitary threats against members of the community of Pedeguita Mansilla, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- take immediate action to dismantle paramilitary groups and break the links between them and the security forces.

We find the incidents reported above quite alarming and we sincerely hope that you will use the power of your high office to address them.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinator

copies: Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz/InterChurch Peace and Justice Commission ~ via US mail
Luis Carlos Villegas, Ambassador of Colombia to the US ~ via fax: 202.232.8643
Adam Lenert, Human Rights Officer, US Embassy in Colombia ~ via email
Tabatha Fairclough, Desk Officer for Colombia, US State Department ~ via email
José de Jesús Orozco Hernández, Rapporteur for Colombia, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202.458.3650
Rose-Marie Belle Antoine, Rapporteur on the Rights of Afro-Descendants, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202.458.3650
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via email

UA 281/13 Update_ Colombia

The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: