

# COLOMBIA

## Peace Community of San Jose de Apartadó

### High ranking army official admits army-paramilitary orchestration of February 2005 massacre

Since 2002, IRTF's RRN has faxed at least 14 letters to Colombian government officials regarding intimidation, harassment, threats and assassinations of residents of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, a small village in the Urabá region, that **declared itself a "Peace Community" in March 1997, insisting that ALL armed actors—guerrillas, army and paramilitaries—stay out of their villages**. Located approximately 12 km from the city of Apartadó, Antioquia Department, San José de Apartadó is comprised of 28 hamlets and has a population of nearly 3,000. Their land is apt for raising cattle and for cultivating corn, cocoa, avocado, yucca, plantains, rice and coffee.

Since its founding in 1970, San José de Apartadó, the government has neglected the social and economic needs of the residents. The guerrilla entered in the region in the 1980s and steadily gained force.

In the beginning, inhabitants had to walk 12 hours to Apartadó to purchase food and carry it back to their hamlets on their backs. With the Patriotic Union, a political party which represented an option for the working class, they were able to build schools and health centers, hire teachers and health promoters, and make road improvements. Leaders emerged who represented the interests of community residents. However, the guerrilla controlled the region and committed human rights abuses, including assassinations.

The Colombian army then entered to strike at a population that it considered collaborators of the guerrilla. **In the 1990s the conflict escalated, and the civilian population suffered the consequences and the attacks from both sides.**

#### **First massacre**

In September of 1996, **a group of armed men accompanied by civilians** entered San José de Apartadó and **forced the leaders of the Communal Action Council and of the Women's Committee out of their homes and assassinated them**. Curiously, the army, which had been occupying the town since August, had retreated that night.

Following this first massacre, the majority of the inhabitants of San José de Apartadó abandoned their homes for fear of another attack; the few who remained went to the mountains at night to sleep, in order to avoid being victims of the paramilitaries, who acted together with the army.

#### **Paramilitaries move in**

That is how the population lived until 1997, when one day at six o'clock in the morning, a group of 40 paramilitaries arrived, the majority of whom were recognized as former members of the EPL guerrilla group (Popular Liberation Army). They made all the inhabitants go to the main sport plaza and, after threatening them, **they proceeded to tie up several persons who were found dead** one day later on the road that leads to Apartadó.

From this moment, the paramilitaries took absolute control of the road that led from San José de Apartadó. They controlled the entrance of food to the town. They continuously stopped vehicles and checked people's identification documents against their own list. They proceeded to assassinate anyone who appeared on the list, or anyone else who appeared suspicious to them.. **All this produced terror, death and hunger among the civilian population**. The few inhabitants that had remained in San José de Apartadó had to flee.

## **Peace Community is established**

In March 1997, a group of residents declared San José de Apartadó a “Peace Community,” insisting that all armed actors stay out of their town and surrounding hamlets. Nevertheless, **over 160 of its members have been killed or “disappeared”**—the vast majority by security forces and their paramilitary allies, the remainder by the FARC. Colombian authorities have done little to protect the community, despite a **March 15, 2005 resolution by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights** calling on them to do so. And despite the supposed demobilization of Colombia’s army-backed paramilitary groups, continued human rights abuses and recent public statements by paramilitary organizations have made clear that their command structures remain intact.

## **Good News! Impunity is weakening as army admits guilt**

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May 13, 2008, brought promising news in the field of justice and accountability for human rights violations committed against the Peace Community. **Captain Guillermo Gordillo**, the highest army official arrested so far in connection with a February 2005 massacre of eight people, including 3 children, **confessed that the massacre was perpetrated in a joint operation by the Army’s 17th Brigade and right-wing death squads** under the command of paramilitary leader Don Berna. Gordillo told human rights prosecutors that the military operation had been “planned long ago from above, with ranking commanders”.

The next day, however, Don Berna and 13 other paramilitary leaders who had supposedly been demobilized under the so-called “Justice and Peace Law” were extradited to the United States to face drug-related charges. With the paramilitary bosses gone, Gordillo’s attorney requested on May 15 that the hearing be suspended indefinitely, a move suggesting that his client’s willingness to cooperate with prosecutors had come to an end.

## **What is at stake**

Gordillo’s confession to the brutal killing of Peace Community members brings the recent “para-politics” scandal to a new dimension. It reveals **strong ties between the high-ranking officers of the Colombian armed forces and the paramilitary death squads**. The ties go beyond the army’s passive tolerance of paramilitary activity – or its refusal to go after them— and **includes planning and carrying out brutal atrocities**.

A cover-up operation took place immediately after the February 2005 massacre. The Defense Minister asserted that no army troops had been in the area. There is also the testimony, according to a Reuters press report, of paramilitary soldier alias Pirulo indicating that the order to kill two children, ages 1 and 6, had been issued by Gordillo, under the pretext that those children would grow up to become guerrillas. The same testimony indicated that Natalia walked to her death carrying a doll and a plastic bag with clothes for her brother, thinking that she was about to go on a trip.