

COLOMBIA

The Inter-American Court on Human Rights (CorteIDH) cites Colombia for illegal monitoring of human rights defenders by the state

For more than 15 years, the Cleveland InterReligious Task Force on Central America & Colombia (IRTF) has been writing Rapid Response letters on behalf of the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyer's Collective, expressing concerns about the numerous death threats by paramilitary groups that lawyers from that collective and other human rights defenders in Colombia have received over the years. The organization has also been a victim to illegal surveillance and state intelligence, making their work even more dangerous.

RRN letter 03/2012 - excerpt

"On February 27 the paramilitary organization Los Rastrojos Urban Commands delivered a death threat to the office of the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR) in Bogotá. [...] The threat made explicit reference to the intelligence work that had been undertaken against these organizations: "surveillance and infiltration and extraction of information from politicians, human rights organizations, trade unionists and displaced people." CCAJAR, and other Colombian NGOs, have all been subject to illegal surveillance and threats coordinated by the government's Civilian Security Department (DAS) which had a long history of working in collusion with paramilitary groups."

RRN letter 02/2014 - excerpt

"We are deeply concerned about the recent death threats to several persons who are candidates in the legislative elections scheduled for March 9. On February 4, the Black Eagles Capital Bloc (paramilitary organization) sent a death threat by email to the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR) and to Iván Cepeda, a member of the Colombian Congress. On the day of the threat described above, the media reported that military intelligence was carrying out illegal surveillance and wiretapping a number of targets, including the Colombian peace negotiation teams in Cuba, Colombian nongovernmental organizations and political leaders. In previous years, illegal surveillance operations of this kind have been carried out in close cooperation with paramilitaries."

GOOD NEWS

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CorteIDH) called a public hearing for a lawsuit filed against the Colombian government by the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR), calling for accountability from the government for "illegal monitoring by the State for more than 30 years."

This was the first time that a human rights NGO arrives at the CorteIDH as a victim instead of a representative for other victims. It was also the first time the Court held hearings on the use of technology for state surveillance.

The hearings were held on May 12 and 13, 2022, and victims and experts spoke about the negative impacts and torture-like effects of systematic surveillance on their personal and work life, as well as exposing the limits of actions that state intelligence bodies can perform legally.

IRTF acknowledges this step towards ensuring safety for human rights defenders in Colombia. Citing the Colombian government for the illegal surveillance of human rights defenders at the CorteIDH shows that the human rights movement and court are no longer tolerating the government's impunity and the violence practiced by paramilitary groups. However, this is only a step in what needs to be a reformation of state and military forces in Colombia in order for human rights collectives, defenders, and their families to live without fear.

Rapid Response Network

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IRTF calls together the people of northeast Ohio—and across the US—to walk in solidarity with oppressed peoples of Central America and Colombia to achieve peace, justice, human rights, and systemic transformation through nonviolence. www.IRTFcleveland.org

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