

Colombia: **Socio-political violence and internal armed conflict**

The present socio-political violence can be described as product of a persistent structural violence and an armed conflict which has lasted more than four decades.

However, since 1970, Colombia had already been identified as a country with constant violations of human rights, among them the use of torture to obtain information, forced disappearances, sexual abuse and rape against women arrested in military prisons. Today, leaders of various social movements and democratic politicians are being threatened, harassed, abused and killed. They are also victims of forced displacement or exile only because they opt to dissent or claim for fundamental rights.

The POPULAR FEMALE ORGANIZATION/ ORGANIZACIÓN FEMENINA POPULAR –OFP- has denounced before international and local Human Rights organizations the following facts:

1. Incursion of paramilitary groups in Barrancabermeja and threats against their organization
2. In 2001 members of paramilitary groups broke into the Casa de la Mujer of the OFP, pressing women who were in charge of the comedor popular/ popular dining hall, to give them the keys of the institution. The same year paramilitaries destroyed one of the branches of the OFP; its building was torn apart and they took with them even the debris.

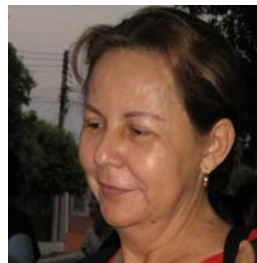
From that time onwards the different branches of the OFP have been under surveillance, attacked and suffered numbers of hostilities and irruptions.

- In 2001. The Inter-institutional Commission for the Investigation on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in Barrancabermeja publicly exposed the existence of a plan to kill YOLANDA BECERRA VEGA, president of the OFP, by the paramilitaries.
 - Between 2001 and 2007, YOLANDA and other members of the OFP, have been victims of threats and abuses perpetrated by paramilitary groups. We can mention the following members: JACQUELINE ROJAS, PATRICIA RAMÍREZ, GLORIA AMPARO SUÁREZ, MARIANELA MÉNDEZ, CLEOTILDE MORÓN, GRACIELA ALFARO, MARIA EMILSE ALVARADO, INÉS PEÑA, MONGUÍ GÓMEZ, MYRIAM LEAL and GRACIELA MEJÍA.
 - The last event occurred against YOLANDA BECERRA, on November 4th when two armed men with their heads covered and dressed like civilians entered her apartment in Barrancabermeja, destroying everything and shouting death threats against her.
3. Killings of relatives and members of the OFP:
 - In 2002 DIOFANOL SIERRA VARGAS, Instructor of Art and Culture of the OFP, is killed in the town of Nueva Esperanza.

- In 2002 ESPERANZA AMARIS MIRANDA member of the OFP, is abducted from her house, taken in a car, killed and her body was thrown to one of the streets.
 - In 2003, JOSÉ DE JESÚS ROJAS CASTAÑEDA, brother of JACKELINE ROJAS who is a member of the OFP, was killed.
4. The same way other relatives and husbands of the members of the OFP were killed:
CAICEDO OLMEDO y GEOMAR VALENCIA CORDOVA, DIMAS JOSE ESMERAL DIAZ, PASCUAL CARVAJAL ROJAS,
- We have suffered disappearances of not only members but their relatives: JOSÉ ARMANDO GARZÓN RUEDA KATHERINE GONZALEZ TORRES

The OFP firmly continues with its purpose of defending the right to autonomy and civilian determination against armed groups. This is a struggle women are fighting in the name of civil resistance as women who want to build a world based on justice, dignity and equity.

This paper was delivered by Norma Enriquez, Regional Coordinator of the Comité de América Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer (CLADEM) during the International Women Human Rights Defenders Day, November 29, 2007, Bangkok Thailand



YOLANDA BECERRA VEGA

Colombian, born in Barrancabermeja (Santander) in 1959. Human Rights Defender, main leader of the Social Movement of Women, leader of the OFP a grassroots organization which operates from Magdalena Medio.

Graduated in Social Sciences / emphasis on Democracy. Twenty three years of experience working with men and women to preserve the dignity of life in the midst of various socio-political conflicts with a strong presence of legal and illegal armed actors, working from a

region with drastic contrasts and gaps between rich and poor, where serious violations of human rights are rampant.

She is Coordinator of the proposal named " Movimiento de Mujeres Contra la Guerra", (Movement of Women against the war) led by the OFP and Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres.

**HISTORY of the organization I represent:
THAT IS HOW WE WERE BORN...HOW WE GREW...
HOW WE ARE**

In Barrancabermeja, Colombia, during the 70s, women were victims of poverty, violence and harassment perpetrated by their husbands. Their role as protagonists in the fights to recover land for housing purposes deserved the interest of active priests involved with Catholic groups in the region who started promoting the creation of housewives' clubs which later became the basis of the OFP as part of a Programme of Social Religious approach. (Pastoral Social).

In 1988, with a legacy of social struggles, the OFP went a step forward and assumed its autonomy before the Church.

We have been defending, from a gender perspective, issues related to civilian stand, autonomy, non-violent resistance, women and peoples' rights during the last 34 years. We believe in life and democracy.

The OFP/ Organization Femenina Popular is alive in the region of Magdalena Medio, south of Bolívar, North-East of Antioquia, in 5 municipal councils of Santander. During the last years we have extended our work to popular sectors in the cities of Bogotá Neiva and Cartagena.

United and organized, more than 5,000 women in the country have made an impact in the lives of more than 150,000 people, through the social effect of the work of displaced women, women from popular sectors, housewives and young women. In projects related to food security we work with women who belong to different sectors without discrimination of sex, religion, nationality or level of education.

We look for the integral development of all the communities through organisation, an economy based on solidarity, health and culture, within an educational process to make people aware of the need to defend life and re-vindicate the rights of women, opening their eyes to distinctions based on class and gender.

We stand for a reconstruction of the social net of the popular communities. We walk on paths conducive to more balanced and just societies in all social, political, economic and cultural aspects.

More than 30 years of resistance

From 1996 we have been nurturing our political proposal *Women against the War*, a brainchild of the solidarity initiative "Women against the War; Women for Peace"/ "Cadena de Mujeres Contra la Guerra y por la Paz". During all these years we have pushed and worked from a civil

and autonomous resistance, coining our slogan: LAS MUJERES NO PARIMOS NI FORJAMOS HIJOS E HIJAS PARA LA GUERRA: WE WOMEN DO NOT GIVE BIRTH TO OUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS FOR WARFARE.

Coordination and Alliances

Our consolidation as organization has been possible thanks to the effort and commitment of men and women who believe in our principles and respect our stand on civil resistance and our unbreakable conviction as human rights defenders.

Our decisive work, organized and permanently active, has allowed us as women and as human beings to keep our dignity in the middle of conditions which are completely adverse to our principles of liberty and justice.