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The expression of political and social violence through paramilitary pamphlets

Since the beginning of 2009, pamphlets have been circulating in several of the country's departments in which various population groups are threatened with "*social cleansing*." Although such manifestations of aggression have reached the point of generating panic, they are far from being overcome, since the highest government authorities refuse to acknowledge them and to identify their true source. Such acts are typical of paramilitary groups and should be confronted in a decisive manner instead of stubbornly concealing their existence.

The obsession against certain population groups

The first pamphlets include expressions of generalized violence against young people, suspected thieves, homosexuals, sex workers, boys, girls, and women, among others. These types of threats have been used by paramilitary groups for many years. In the case of women, for example, there are pamphlets that, on the one hand, include threats against women's organizations from popular and *campesino* sectors; and, on the other, they contain attacks that aim at controlling the sexual lives of women. The flyers also include threats against women who practice prostitution or who work in bars, or who are HIV/AIDS positive. There are other pamphlets directly and exclusively against homosexuals and lesbians, such as those that have circulated in Bogotá with the slogan "*for a society free of gays*." Boys and girls, as well as youths, have also been directly affected by the circulation of these pamphlets, as the paramilitary groups have declared "*curfews*" establishing timetables during which they are allowed to walk on the streets. According to the flyers, "*good children go to bed early, and as to the others, we put them to sleep ourselves*." Likewise, in the pamphlets the paramilitary groups "*suggest*" that these population groups must practice certain types of behaviors, such as setting a "*good example*" and "*studying harder*."

More recently, pamphlets have been circulating with much more specific messages. At the beginning of May, the "Bloque Metropolitano" that is part of the paramilitary group "Águilas Negras" ("Black Eagles") circulated a flyer in Bogotá signed by a paramilitary boss identified as "commander Camilo," in which he states that "*a total rearmament of the paramilitary forces*" has begun by which "*all types of social scum*" will be "*exterminated*," referring indiscriminately to supposed delinquents, social leaders, union members, human rights defenders, homosexuals, sexual workers, students, and politicians. In that same pamphlet, the work of the Public Defender's Office's Early Warning System is called into question, and the System's staff members are branded as "snitches" because of the

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legitimate role of denunciation and alert that the Defender's Office has been developing with regard to the presence of the "Black Eagles" paramilitary group in Bogotá.

This past April, the Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported the existence of at least 26 different versions of these pamphlets, circulating in 24 of the country's 32 departments.¹ According to that Office, the first pamphlets began circulating in the "communes" of the city of Medellín beginning in February and then spread throughout the rest of the country. Since then, the explanations given by the authorities as to the authors of these pamphlets have been ambiguous and disrespectful to the very communities that are being affected.

Concealment of the authors

As soon as the first pamphlets appeared, General Óscar Naranjo, Director of the National Police, declared that the sources of the pamphlets were diverse: "*Some pamphlets are being distributed by criminal gangs that aim to frighten the population, others originate clearly in the FARC as part of a plan to carry out a 'black March' in retaliation for the death of Raúl Reyes e Iván Ríos a year ago.*"² General Naranjo even insinuated that some parents could be responsible for some of these pamphlets, "*in order to keep their children from falling into the hands of the 'jibaros' or drug dealers.*"³ Likewise, he informed that some of the pamphlets had been written by community groups known as Juntas de Acción Comunal (JAC), as "*in some regions of Colombia, community leaders have become organized to confront the gangs of drug dealers known as 'jibaros'.*"⁴

President Álvaro Uribe Vélez too made some declarations during one of his community councils, just days after the pamphlets appeared in the municipality of Neiva (Huila) increasing the risks suffered by the civilian population in that municipality:

*"It can't be that each month an explosive goes off. The Army and the Police in Neiva must find a definitive solution. It is necessary, starting today, to begin a new militarization and a massive police presence in the Neiva communes, and in Commune 10, where according to informants there is a tremendous plague of FARC militiamen and extortionists. We must capture them without delay."*⁵

¹ Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "*Oficina de la ONU para los Derechos Humanos preocupada por la ola de panfletos amenazantes*" (UN Human Rights Office concerned about the wave of threatening pamphlets), press release, April 29, 2009.

² *El Espectador* daily newspaper, "Farc estaría detrás de algunos panfletos con amenazas" (FARC supposedly behind some of the threatening pamphlets), March 18, 2009, electronic version.

³ Caracol Radio, "Bandas emergentes y delincuencia común estarían detrás de panfletos de 'limpieza social'", (Emerging gangs and common delinquents supposedly behind the 'social cleansing' pamphlets) March 18 2009, electronic version.

⁴ Mesa Humanitaria del Meta, "Los panfletos alarman" (The pamphlets are alarming) in: *Hechos del Callejón* n.º 46, Bogotá, May 2009, p. 19.

⁵ Press Office of the Presidency of the Republic, "Presidente ordena militarización de las comunas de Neiva, por presencia de milicianos de las Farc" (President orders militarization of the Neiva communes because of

Since the first pamphlet appeared and up until now, no authority has been heard to mention the responsibility of the paramilitary groups in their preparation and distribution. On the contrary, declarations by the President and the Director of the Police validate the theories in the pamphlets that claim the presence of supposed guerrillas and supposed extortionists in the communities. On the other hand, they evade discussing the true authors of the pamphlets and attribute the responsibility for them to guerrilla groups and “emerging gangs,” and even to the parents or the members of the JAC. Besides generating a climate of confusion, they tarnish the good name and dignity of these persons, who not only are not responsible for the pamphlets but are in fact their victims.

Although many of the pamphlets were distributed without mention of specific authors, they do include a drawing of a man with an armband with the abbreviation AUC. More recent ones have been signed by the “Black Eagles” (“Águilas Negras”) and the “Metropolitan Block.” Some older ones circulated under the authorship of the Gaitanista Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia - AGC). These three groups, that the government has insisted on calling “*criminal gangs*,” are paramilitary groups that operate under different names after the supposed demobilization of the paramilitary groups that make up the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC). This has been confirmed even by these groups themselves, which in the last few pamphlets have declared that “*we are not emerging gangs. We are Águilas Negras and we are present. We are the army of social restoration.*”⁶

Re-editing paramilitary strategies

The emergence of these pamphlets in Colombia is not new. It has been used frequently by paramilitary groups to exert social control of the civilian population and of the territories. This was expressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Mr. Amos Wako, during his visit to Colombia in 1989:

*“The elimination of members of marginal and poor sectors of the population has been a constant phenomenon in the last 15 years, especially in urban regions of Colombia. Beginning in 1979, when the first of such acts occurred with the assassination of several delinquents by a ‘death squadron,’ this form of violence has spread rapidly to other cities of Colombia: Medellín and Bogotá in 1980, Cali and other cities of the Cauca Valley region in 1981, Bucaramanga and other urban areas of the Middle Magdalena region in 1983. Since then, according to reports, assassinations motivated by ‘social cleansing’ have taken place in all of Colombia’s departments.”*⁷

presence of FARC militiamen) , March 7 2009, consulted in:
<http://web.presidencia.gov.co/sp/2009/marzo/07/02072009.html>

⁶ *Semana* Newsmagazine, “Águilas Negras envían amenazas documentadas” (Black Eagles send documented threats) , May 14, 2000, consulted in: www.semana.com

⁷ United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions, *Report on the visit to Colombia carried out by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Amos S. Wako, on summary or arbitrary executions (October 11-20 1989)*, United Nations, doc. E/CN.4/1990/22/Add.1, January 24 1990, par. 48.

On the other hand, during her visit to this country in 2001, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women declared: “*paramilitaries have begun practicing other forms of domination in the regions under their power. (...) They impose rigorous regimes of social behavior that include restrictions on what women can and cannot wear, as well as punishments for ‘bad conduct’.*”⁸ Likewise, after a joint visit to Colombia in 1994, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on Summary or Arbitrary Executions and on Torture, referring to the population victim of the so-called ‘*social cleansing*,’ declared:

*“Besides delinquents, persons of other sectors of the population whose presence is considered undesirable have become victims of these assassinations: prostitutes, homosexuals, beggars, drug addicts, and street children. Before they are assassinated, torture is usually applied, seemingly with the purpose of preventing the identification of the victims (and, as a result, of any investigation) and to send intimidating messages to those sectors. Several sources expressed to the Special Rapporteurs their concern that, as the years go by, ‘social cleansing’ has come to be a fact that is more and more accepted and acceptable as a solution to the problems posed by the marginal sectors of the population.”*⁹

Things being what they are, both the social violence expressed in attacks against socially marginalized persons considered undesirable for society by the paramilitary groups, and the political violence expressed in attacks against social and human rights organizations, community leaders, or any organization or body committed to the defense of human rights or to leftist political ideas, are typical manifestations of paramilitarism, which since its inception has been exercising these two types of violence against civil society.

Without real acknowledgment, doubtful protection

Thus, although the present situation is worrying, it is not surprising; all the more, since the supposed extinction of the paramilitaries announced by the national government is just a fiction created to legitimize the negotiation process that the government of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez initiated in 2002 with the paramilitary groups. Nor is it surprising that the government’s response in the face of this situation should be a total denial of the real authors of the pamphlets and of the existence of paramilitarism as we know it, since it is the same response that the government has given to formal complaints regarding other human rights violations, such as selective homicides, massacres, forced disappearances,

⁸ United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, *Reporto n visit to Colombia carried out by the Special Rapporteur, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, (November 1-7 2001)*, United Nations, doc. E/CN.4/2002/83/Add.3, March 11 2002, par. 46.

⁹ United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, and Arbitrary Executions, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, *Joint report on visit to Colombia carried out by Special Rapporteur Mr. Bacre Waly Ndiaye, on summary or arbitrary executions and by Special Rapporteur, Mr. Nigel S. Rodley, on Torture*, (October 17-26 1994), United Nations, doc. E/CN.4/1995/111, January 16 1995, par. 49.

recruitment of boys and girls, and forced displacements committed by paramilitary groups that are now acting under different denominations.

However, although the response might not be surprising, it is against the international obligations that the Colombian State has contracted with regard to the effective dismantlement of paramilitary structures and to the investigation and punishment of human rights violations, among which are the threats contained in those pamphlets and other serious human rights violations that could arise as a result of their content. A response that claims to protect the civilian population in the face of the threats in the pamphlets must, necessarily, start with acknowledging the existence of the paramilitary structures. Any different response will be insufficient and will maintain the present impunity regarding the crimes that have continued to be carried out by paramilitaries since the government stated that they had disappeared.

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