

Dec. 3 Murder of José Rojas Castañeda

December 4, 2003

Dear Friends,

José Rojas Castañeda, a member of the teachers' union in the city of Barrancabermeja in Colombia, was shot to death last night at 9 P.M. Two men came to his home and murdered him in front of his wife, who is eight-months pregnant with their first child. José was the brother of Jacqueline Rojas Castañeda, who is a prominent leader of the Low-Income Women's Organization (OFP – Organización Femenina Popular). José was also the brother-in-law of Juan Carlos Galvis, vice president of the Coke workers' union (SINALTRAINAL) in Barrancabermeja. Jacqueline and Juan Carlos are good friends of mine.

I talked this morning with Juan Carlos and William Mendoza, president of SINALTRAINAL in Barrancabermeja. The analysis of human rights activists in Barrancabermeja is that José was murdered because he was Jacqueline's brother – this was a way for the paramilitaries to deliver a blow to the OFP. William and the other activists in Barrancabermeja are very worried about what could now happen to their family members. Some of the activists have "precautionary measures" (vehicles and armed bodyguards) that are provided by the government, but their families do not have that same degree of protection. William said, "We're very worried for our families. Once again, the families are the ones that are most threatened."

Juan Carlos and William are asking us to contact the U.S. embassy, the Coca-Cola Company, and the police commander in Barrancabermeja (for Spanish speakers) to express our concern about this grave situation.

What follows is contact information and suggested messages for those individuals.

On behalf of Jacqueline, Juan Carlos, and William, please take a moment now to send those messages.

In solidarity,

Scott Nicholson
Montana Human Rights Network

U.S. Embassy in Bogotá
Stewart Tuttle
tuttlesd@state.gov
011-57-1-315-2130 (011 is the international access code, 57 is the country code for Colombia, and 1 is the city code for Bogotá)
tuttlesd@state.gov
Matthew Johnson
JohnsonMR2@state.gov, 011-57-310-859-6759
Both Stewart and Matthew work on human rights issues

Dear Stewart and Matthew,

I'm writing to express my grave concern about the murder of José de Jesus Rojas Castañeda. José was the brother of Jacqueline Rojas Castañeda, a prominent leader of the Organización Femenina Popular (OFP). He was also the brother-in-law of Juan Carlos Galvis, president of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores and vice president of SINALTRAINAL in Barrancabermeja. José was a teacher in the Instituto Técnico Superior de Comercio and a member of the Asociación Sindical de Educadores Municipales. At 9 P.M. on December 3, two men came to his house in the Bosque de la Cira barrio in the southeastern sector of Barrancabermeja. They shot José to death in front of his wife, who is eight-months pregnant with their first child.

Human rights activists in Barrancabermeja believe that José was murdered because he was Jacqueline's brother – this was a way for the paramilitaries to deliver a blow to the OFP. Juan Carlos Galvis, William Mendoza (president of SINALTRAINAL), and other activists in Barrancabermeja are very worried about what could now happen to their family members. Some of the activists have "medidas cautelares" (precautionary measures) but their families do not have that same degree of protection.

As you're well aware, Barrancabermeja has been controlled by the paramilitaries for the past three years. Although the city is heavily militarized, the paramilitaries roam freely – particularly in the poor eastern neighborhoods.

I'm writing to urge you to contact the appropriate authorities in Barrancabermeja (police, military, municipal government) and call on them to thoroughly investigate the murder of José Rojas and take all necessary actions to protect the family members of human rights activists.

Please let me know what actions the embassy has taken. I will be following this situation very closely.

Sincerely,

Barrancabermeja Police Commander
Teniente Coronel Jorge William Gil Caycedo
Cell phone – 011-57-310-273-2039 (011 is the international access code, 57 is the country code for Colombia, and 310 is the cell phone code)

I spoke with the colonel this afternoon. He said he was aware of the killing and that José was Jacqueline's brother. He primarily tried to defend the actions of the police in the city, although he did admit that the paramilitaries control parts of Barrancabermeja. He seemed surprised to get a call from the U.S. and it would be great if he received more calls.

The Coca-Cola Company
Sonya Soutus, Assistant Vice President and Director of Media Relations
ssoutus@na.ko.com, 404-676-3090
Lori Billingsley, Issues Director, Media Relations
lbillingsley@na.ko.com, 404-676-0621

Dear Ms. Soutus and Ms. Billingsley,

I'm writing to express my concern about the grave situation of the family members of the Coca-Cola union workers in Colombia.

On December 3, at 9 P.M., two men came to the house of José Rojas Castañeda in the city of Barrancabermeja. They shot him to death in front of his wife, who is eight-months pregnant with their first child. José was the brother-in-law of Juan Carlos Galvis, former president and current vice president of the Coke workers' union (SINALTRAINAL) in Barrancabermeja.

It appears that the paramilitaries in Barrancabermeja are now targeting family members of labor and human rights activists. Juan Carlos Galvis, William Mendoza (president of SINALTRAINAL in Barrancabermeja), and the national leadership of the union are very concerned about the safety of their families. Because of the death threats that the union leaders have received, they have protective

measures that are provided by the Colombia government. However, their family members do not have that same degree of protection.

The union leaders have reason to be concerned. As you're well aware, the paramilitaries murdered Isidro Segundo Gil inside the Coke bottling plant in Carepa on December 5, 1996. Four years later, Alcira del Carmen Herrera Perez, Isidro's widow, was taken from her house and killed a few yards away.

I'm writing to urge the Coca-Cola Company to take appropriate actions to protect the lives of the families of the Coke union workers in Colombia.

Please let me know what actions the company has taken. I will be following this situation very closely.

Sincerely,