

Indigenous Woman Shot Dead in Colombia as Activists Targeted



Bogota, February 14 (RHC)-- Another Indigenous leader and activist was killed in Colombia as authorities refuse to acknowledge the return or existence of paramilitaries in native communities. Yoryanis Isabel Bernal Varela of the Wiwa tribe in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a strong spiritual Indigenous territory, fought to protect Indigenous and women's rights in her community.

"They took away a great leader, and when this happens, our culture is diminished because there are not many people brave enough to face our issues in public order, which is always dangerous," said head of the tribal council of the Arhuaco, Kogui and Wiwa peoples, Jose de los Santos Sauna.

Eyewitnesses said that she was threatened with a gun by several people on motorcycle, who then shot her in the head, reported Contagio Radio. They suspect the assassins were paramilitaries, but an investigation is underway.

"Indigenous people are being threatened and intimidated," said secretary of the Wiwa Golkuche organization Jose Gregorio Rodríguez shortly after her murder. "Today they murdered our comrade and violated our rights. Our other leaders must be protected."

At least 119 human rights defenders have been killed in Colombia since the government signed the peace accords with the FARC. Still, officials are in denial of the presence of paramilitaries, which have been

reported to have been emboldened by the retreat of the FARC through the peace accords.

“There are no paramilitaries, and to assume there are would be to grant them political assurances to those who don’t deserve them,” said Defense Minister Luis Carlos Villegas on RCN Radio a week before Bernal Varela’s murder. “There are killings, but they’re not systematic.”

Two weeks before, prominent peace activist Emilsen Manyoma, an Afro-Colombian woman that led CONPAZ, or Communities Constructing Peace in the Territories, was killed alongside her husband.

A few days before that, Indigenous rights activist Olmedo Pito Garcia, who organized with the Landless Movement of Manuel Quintin’s Grandchildren, was stabbed as he was walking home. He was also a member of Marcha Patriótica, which lost 120 members since the group was founded in 2012, a chilling reality that social leaders have argued is part of a new political genocide in Colombia.

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