

12 April 2017

Colombia: Abduction, aggression and sexual assault against a woman close to human rights defender Marylen Serna Salinas

On 7 April 2017, a woman close to human rights defender, **Marylen Serna Salinas**, was abducted, interrogated, beaten, tortured and sexually assaulted by three unidentified men in Popayán, Colombia.

[Marylen Serna Salinas](#) is the leader of the campesino organisation, *Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío - MCC (Peasant Movement of Cajibío)*, and also exercises leadership roles with *Coordinador Nacional Agrario – CNA (Agrarian National Coordinator)* and *Cumbre Agraria, Campesina, Étnica y Popular (Agrarian, Peasant, Ethnic and Popular Summit)*. The human rights defender is also the national spokesperson for [Congreso de los Pueblos \(Congress of Peoples\)](#). MCC is a movement for the defence of indigenous and land rights in the northern region of Colombia and Macizo. CNA is an organisation which coordinates the *campesino* and indigenous movements in Colombia, in order to facilitate their struggle for land and other rights. The Summit gathers different indigenous, afro-descendent, *campesino* and popular movements in order to propose a new model to strengthen their rights and work. *Congreso de los Pueblos* is a social movement which brings together different sectors and social actors. Since its launch in 2010, it has had a prominent role in social mobilisations in Colombia, such as the agricultural strikes of 2013, 2014 and 2016.

On the morning of 7 April 2017, a peasant woman close to Marylen Serna Salinas was approached by three armed men, who forced her into a vehicle and covered her head with a black bag. The men beat the woman's face and arm and injected an unknown substance into her right arm. She was interrogated as to the whereabouts of Marylen Serna Salinas and asked to clarify the nature of her relationship with the human rights defender. After the interrogation, the criminals took the vehicle to a quiet location in the city, where they tied the woman up and sexually abused her. The criminals then left without untying and freeing the woman and proceeded to call Marylen Serna Salinas to confirm her relationship with the victim, stating that the act was perpetrated as a result of their relationship and the work of the human rights defender. The crime had already been reported to the National Public Prosecution.

This gendered act of violence is the last one in a series of attacks, killings, threats and intimidation against social, indigenous, *campesino* and land rights movements in Colombia. In the last month, Front Line Defenders has reported several violations against human rights defenders in the country. Between 21 and 22 March 2017, during a series of coordinated events, the Police and the National Army conducted raids on homes and arrested several [social leaders](#) and human rights defenders from the southern Bolívar region, including members of the *Congreso de los Pueblos*. The Colombian State has previously accused social leaders of being linked to guerrilla groups without concrete evidence.

Front Line Defenders is concerned about the situation in Colombia. On 2 March 2017, the killing of [Ruth Alicia Lopez Guisao](#) brought the number of community leaders killed in the country to 25 since the start of 2017. The human rights defender worked with indigenous people and was a member of *Congreso de los Pueblos*. In its [2017 Annual Report](#), which covers the period between January and December 2016, Front Line Defenders reported 281 killings of human rights defenders worldwide. 86 of those killings took place in Colombia, making it the country with the highest number of killings of human rights defenders in the world.

According to a [report](#) from the Colombian Ombudsman Office, 156 social leaders and human rights defenders have been killed in the last 14 months. In addition to that, 5 disappearances, 33 attacks and over 500 threats were reported. According to the Ombudsman, Carlos Alfonso Negret Mosquera: “one of the main causes of this phenomenon is the attempt by illegal armed groups to occupy the territory from which the FARC have withdrawn”.

On 2 April 2017, in the afternoon, human rights defender, [José Vicente Murillo Tobo](#), also a member of *Congreso de los Pueblos*, attended a cultural exchange round-table for dialogue and consultation between indigenous and land rights organisations with the Colombian government. After the meeting, the human rights defender received a text message and a phone call containing threats against him for his human rights work. The person identified himself as Camilo and said he was the leader of *Águilas Negras* (Black Eagles), a paramilitary organisation in Colombia.

The Colombian government signed a peace deal with *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) rebels in November 2016, but this has not made the country safer for indigenous and human rights activists. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the government continues to maintain the position that these killings are neither systematic nor linked to paramilitary activity, and refuses to recognise the cause of the deaths instead of taking actions to prevent them from happening.

Front Line Defenders is concerned at the most recent gendered act of violence against the woman close to human rights defender Marylen Serna Salinas, since the violence was perpetrated directly in relation to her human rights work and leading roles in her community and organisations. Front Line Defenders expresses further concern at the ongoing violence against social leaders in Colombia, particularly human rights defenders working on areas that have been historically affected by the presence of illegal armed groups.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Colombia to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the crimes perpetrated against the woman close to the human rights defender, **Marylen Serna Salinas**, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all the necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity of the woman close to Marylen Serna Salinas, as well as of the human rights defender herself and all the members of *Congreso de los Pueblos* and other grass-roots organisations in Colombia;
3. Urges the government to investigate the pattern of killings and harassment of human rights defenders, identify the root causes and the authors, and take determined action to prevent them.