

## **New rebel threats against Americans in Colombia renew concerns for missionaries**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

**Miami** (LAMNS)—New reported threats against Americans in Colombia are once again causing U.S. missionaries to be careful about their movements.

In addition, spillover of the over 40-year-old rebel conflict into neighboring countries is also affecting missionary work there.

U.S. embassy officials said they were investigating a reported order from a rebel commander to attack U.S. citizens in Colombia.

The threats were reported to have come from intercepted two-way radio conversations between rebel groups.

The new threats followed a warning issued by the U.S. embassy in Bogotá last March that evangelical missionaries in rural Colombia might be the targets of guerrilla attacks.

A transcript of the most recent threat reads: “We must find where the gringos are, because they have all declared war on us.”

Police authorities identified the voice as that of Jorge Briceno, a high-ranking military commander with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

“This is a renewal of Briceno’s threats of two years ago,” said veteran LAM missionary Nick Woodbury who served in Colombia for many years and now lives in Miami. “He opposes U.S. citizens because the United States gives money to Colombia. He has threatened North Americans before.”

“Alleged threats against U.S. citizens are constant but they hardly are confirmed and thankfully seldom take place,” reported LAM-Canada missionary Alvin Góngora who lives in Bogotá.

However, Góngora reported that, “the increasing and unnecessary involvement of the U.S. government in Colombian affairs is a contributing factor.”

Góngora said that while some missionaries have left the country because of increasing violence and threats, many still remain. “Christian student organizations and the churches that are closely involved in several human rights projects still receive personnel, visitors and short-termers from the U.S.”

Góngora reminded that Colombians are in far greater, daily danger than North Americans. “While we worry about the security of our U.S. sisters and brothers that serve God in Colombia, and pray for them, Colombians are the ones who are being singled out, targeted, harassed and killed,” he said.

Meanwhile, missionary work in neighboring countries is also affected by the spillover of violence into Venezuela, Ecuador and Brazil. Over 100 people have been killed in the past few months in the Ecuadorian town of Lago Agrio, twelve miles from the river that separates the two nations. Officials said that FARC guerrillas have a list of 300 additional people targeted for assassination.

Guerrillas use Ecuadorian territory for staging and recuperation as government troops have pushed into their southern-Colombian stronghold.

“Our missionaries in Ibarra maintain that things have gotten ‘rougher’ over the last year or so,” reported Dan Batchelor, a missionary with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. Ibarra is a province of Ecuador located near the Colombian border. “There are lots of rapid kidnappings and the sort. Locals say that it is the guerrillas,” Batchelor said.

Along Ecuador’s coast near the city of Esmeraldas, Batchelor reported that missionaries have had to take caution.

“In our work with the Chachi Indians on the Cayapa River we have been hampered,” he said. “We have had to curtail trips up the Cayapa River into the jungle where the Chachi live. Our Missionaries were going up to the river to different villages when the villagers told them they shouldn’t be coming due to guerrilla activity.”

Batchelor said that his mission “cautions our people, if they do venture into these areas, to maintain a low profile and to work with locals who will in turn do the most visible work.”

Other missions have advised missionaries to curtail travel to the border areas. “HCJB has informed us all that if we have plans to travel north of the Pichincha province we have to notify our supervisors and the Personnel Department,” said missionary Jorge Zambrano. Pichincha province is several hours by car south of the border and the location of the country’s capital, Quito. “The message we are receiving is to not go or plan to deal with it at your own risk,” Zambrano said.

An HCJB missionary was among those assaulted along an Ecuadorian highway near the border with Colombia last February by a group of armed men suspected of being Colombian guerrillas.

Sheila Leech, director of the ministry's Community Development Department, was returning from a brief trip to the San Lorenzo Clinic on Ecuador's northern coast when the incident occurred. Eight men, most of them masked, used a tractor-trailer to block the road and proceeded to assault and rob five large inter-provincial buses as well as a number of private vehicles.

There were conflicting reports about whether the robbers were rebel fighters from Colombia or just common criminals. Military authorities downplayed a guerrilla link, but local newspapers reported resident's belief that the attackers were members of FARC.

Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at [info@lam.org](mailto:info@lam.org), or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission's web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

Material from Ralph Kurtenbach of HCJB World Radio in Quito and the Associated Press was used in this story.

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*LAM News Service, Aug 22, 2002*