

Colombia suffering from unionist 'genocide'

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When the hitmen came to murder union leader Rodolfo Vecino, he was nowhere to be found.

Instead, Mr Vecino's wife, bodyguard and friend were in the bullet-proof car as it sped along a motorway in northern Colombia last year.

Two gunmen on motorbikes opened fire nine times on the car's blacked-out windows, but the passengers escaped unharmed.

Three days later, Mr Vecino – a board member of USO, Colombia's oil workers' union – received a death threat by e-mail, saying he and other USO unionists had 20 days to leave their homes to "avoid problems".

"I've received many death threats by phone, fax and e-mail from paramilitary groups over the years," says Mr Vecino. "Once they even tried to abduct my children as they left school."

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The attempt to kill Mr Vecino is an all too familiar story in Colombia.

The plight of the country's unionists has not gone unnoticed among Democrats in the US, who say the Bogotá government must do more to tackle such murders. The issue has become a key stumbling block in securing a bilateral trade deal with Washington that has been derailed by domestic scandals and human rights violations.

"Colombia is still home to the highest number of trade unionists killed in the world, and that's worrying," says Harry Reid, the Democratic Senate majority leader.

Carlos Rodríguez, the president of the Central Trade Union Federation of Colombia, the country's largest labour confederation, believes Democrat concerns are well-founded. Union members, he says, face daily persecution across the country and are prevented from carrying out legal union activities, including collective bargaining.

Susan Lee, Amnesty International's Americas programme director, agrees. "Trade unionists across Colombia are being sent a clear message: Don't complain about your labour conditions or campaign to protect your rights because you will be silenced, at any cost."

Since 1987 more than 2,500 unionists have been murdered in Colombia, a figure which Mr Rodríguez says represents a "genocide". As a security measure he, like dozens of other union leaders, travels in a bullet-proof car with four bodyguards.

A recent Amnesty report highlights that six out of every 10 trade unionists murdered in the world are Colombian. So far this year, 20 union members have been killed in the country, the majority teachers and health workers.

However, Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's president, is quick to point out that during his presidency the killing of trade unionists has fallen by 74 per cent.

Union members are caught in Colombia's internal armed conflict, where being branded a guerrilla sympathiser or collaborator can put civilians at risk.

"Trade unionists are often associated with being part of the opposition or insurgency, in other words against the state, which makes them paramilitary targets," explains Mr Rodríguez. "A teacher working in a rural community who talks about democracy and human rights is often suspected of being a leftwing sympathiser, which then makes them a target of paramilitary groups."

The majority of unionist murders in Colombia have been blamed on rightwing paramilitaries who have been known to operate blacklists, followed by guerrilla groups and roughly 5 per cent by state security agents, says Mr Rodríguez.

Despite the demobilisation of some 31,000 paramilitary fighters as part of a fragile peace deal with the government of Mr Uribe, unionists are still targeted by militias.

US critics have also raised the issue of widespread impunity in Colombia. Few are prosecuted for crimes against trade unionists. "I've reported the death threats and filed several complaints to the authorities but they've done nothing at all," says Mr Vecino.

Partly in response to Democrat demands, Colombia's attorney-general has pledged to increase resources and manpower to make progress in the thousands of unsolved cases of murdered unionists.

Colombian unionists have visited the US in recent months to highlight their precarious situation.

"Democrats, including Al Gore [former US vice-president], and US unions have been listening carefully to our concerns and know about the problems we face. They've told us that while this critical situation continues and no real progress is made, they'll not be approving the trade deal," says Mr Rodríguez.

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