

# Assassins still targeting Colombian unionists

Miami Herald

July 13, 2007

BY STEVEN DUDLEY

The second time gunmen came to kill labor union leader Alberto Bautista was early July 5, just as he was stepping out of his outhouse to get ready for work.

The shooter missed, punching an inch-wide hole into the brick outhouse and sending Bautista, 39, diving for cover. The shooter's weapon jammed, Bautista said, and he ran off. Bautista called the police, whose headquarters are about 30 feet from his house across a grassy field.

"That's why I moved here," he told The Miami Herald hours later, pointing to the police station. "It still took them nine minutes to get here."

It was like many a day for union leaders in Colombia, the most dangerous place in the world to defend workers' rights. Amnesty International, in a report last week that quoted figures from Colombia's National Trade Union School, said that between January 1991 and December 2006, 2,245 trade unionists were killed, 3,400 threatened and 138 "disappeared."

Bautista works at a coal mine owned by the Swiss giant Glencore and is vice president of the local union, which is part of the larger Sintramienergética that represents about 3,000 mining workers throughout Colombia. He says two gunmen also tried to kill him May 14, but he managed to escape them as well. "This isn't for everyone," Bautista said of union work in this country. "There are no heroes here."

Colombia is enmeshed in a four-decades-old war between leftist guerrillas, the government and right-wing paramilitaries.

## DEATH TOLL

The death toll for the war, which had hovered around 3,000 per year, has dropped in recent years amid an unprecedented government offensive against the rebels and a peace process with the paramilitaries. About 30,000 fighters and commanders have demobilized as a result of the talks.

Attacks on union leaders have continued, however. This year, union leaders say, 19 labor activists have been killed.

Both guerrillas and paramilitaries have killed unionists, but the vast majority of deaths are attributed to the right-wing groups, which often offer to help protect companies operating in high-risk areas like La Jagua, in the César province along the Venezuelan border where guerrillas once held sway.

In February, Chiquita Brands International admitted to the U.S. Justice Department it paid the paramilitaries \$1.7 million over seven years in areas where its wholly owned subsidiary was harvesting and exporting bananas. It is paying the U.S. government a \$25 million fine.

#### **PIVOTAL CASE**

This week, a civil suit against the Alabama-based coal mining company Drummond began in Birmingham, alleging the company had links to paramilitaries who killed three Drummond union leaders in 2001. It's the first time a U.S. company is being held accountable in a courtroom for human rights abuses abroad. Drummond, which operates just west of La Jagua, denies the charges and any connections to the paramilitaries.

The killings of union leaders have also undermined U.S. congressional approval of a pending U.S.-Colombian free trade agreement. In a joint statement last week, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.; Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md.; Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., and Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee Chairman Sander Levin, D-Mich., said there is "widespread concern in Congress about the level of violence in Colombia, the impunity, the lack of investigations and prosecutions, and the role of the paramilitary."

"Issues of this nature cannot solely be resolved through [changes in the] language in a trade agreement," they added. "We believe there must first be concrete evidence of sustained results on the ground in Colombia."

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's government has repeatedly insisted it has done more to protect union leaders than previous regimes did. It says the number of unionist murders is much lower than labor leaders claim, and that such deaths dropped from 99 in 2002, when Uribe began his first term, to 25 in 2006.