

Colombian Land Activist Threatened by Paramilitaries Linked to Oil Palm Company Poligrow – EIA Global

WASHINGTON, D.C. – This week, Colombian environmental and land activist William Aljure was threatened by paramilitary leaders and followed by two unidentified men in Villavicencio, Colombia in the region of Meta. According to [Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz](#), a Colombian human rights organization, local paramilitary leader Edgar Pérez (whose alias is “Tomate”) described Mr. Aljure as a “threat to the business” of oil palm in Colombia and called for his assassination. Mr. Aljure recently completed an advocacy trip to Washington, D.C. to speak out about the forced displacement and threats from paramilitary groups with links to oil palm company, [Poligrow Colombia Ltd.](#), against local farmers and indigenous communities in the area around Mapiripán, in Colombia’s plains (llano) region.

The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) strongly denounces the threats and intimidation against Mr. Aljure, and calls upon the Colombian government and the international community to support Mr. Aljure and other activists in Mapiripán by providing substantial protection measures. Colombian human rights organization, Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, has denounced the insufficient security measures implemented by the Colombian government to protect Mr. Aljure, which he has said are limited to provision of a cellular phone and a bulletproof vest. According to Mr. Aljure, when complaints about intimidation were taken to the local government, officials responded that they cannot act until violence actually takes place. Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz is calling for heightened security measures, called esquema duro, a designation in Colombia which includes a vehicle and two armed escorts.

“Land rights are at the heart of the violent conflict which Colombia has suffered for decades,” said Rose Davis EIA Program Coordinator. “Without meaningful protection of land rights activists and local communities, Colombia cannot be considered a safe place to develop large scale agricultural projects, as we see in the case of Poligrow and Mapiripán.

“Brave local leaders like William Aljure are peacefully defending their rights to land and a clean environment, and companies or other organizations that violate those rights, especially through the use of violence, must be brought to justice,” Davis continued.

To bring attention to the abuses suffered in Mapiripán at the hands of the oil palm grower, Poligrow Colombia Ltd., and associated paramilitary structures, Mr. Aljure spoke with the Colombian embassy in Washington, members of U.S. Congress, and members of environmental and labor organizations, to supplement the community organizing taking place in Mapiripán. Mr. Aljure called for international political pressure, media attention, and advocacy for local land rights as the best way to guarantee his, and other activists’, safety in Colombia. A video produced by EIA, Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz and ContagioRadio.com, “[Mapiripán: Between Water and Palm],” documented the abuses taking place in Mapiripán.

Poligrow Colombia Ltd. has taken control of and planted oil palm across thousands of hectares in the Mapiripán area. The company is [a member of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil](#) (RSPO). According to Mr. Aljure, the CEO of Poligrow Carlos Vigna Taglianti has personally intimidated local landholders, traveling to the region and demanding that land be signed over to him. Mr. Aljure also reported that Poligrow's lawyer was present as paramilitaries threatened him and forcibly displaced him from his land near Mapiripán. If basic safety, in addition to land and water rights of local populations in Colombia cannot be ensured, the whole oil palm industry in Colombia is tainted by these reports of violence and intimidation.

According to a [report released by Global Witness](#) in 2015, at least 25 environmental and land defenders were murdered in Colombia in 2014, making it the 2nd most dangerous country in the world for activists fighting to protect land rights and the environment. Fifteen of these murders were carried out against indigenous activists, and some of these murders were clearly linked to paramilitary groups.¹

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The Comision Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz produced a statement on August 19 (Spanish here), an English translation of which can be seen below.

REPORT
Plan to attack Colombian land claimant, William Aljure
META, Colombia
Wednesday August 19, 2015

Paramilitaries are threatening to take the life of Mapiripán community leader, William Aljure, for sustaining his claim to lands that are currently being developed by the Italian oil palm company, Poligrow.

This morning William Aljure was followed by two men at his place of residence in Meta's regional capital, Villavicencio, and as he waited in the Villavicencio airport for his flight to Mapiripán, these men watched him and made themselves threateningly present in his vicinity at the airport.

Last Saturday, August 15, a paramilitary leader from Bloque Meta (also known as Bloque Ganaderos, the Meta or Rancher Block) Edgar Pérez, known by his alias, "Tomate" (tomato, in English), stated that it would be necessary to kill William because he is tarnishing the image of the palm business. The complaints from Mapiripán community members are very serious for Poligrow and for us, and "business could be lost," Pérez said.

This military structure has control over the place known as La Realidad and over the farmland claimed by the Aljure family. Part of the palm project is being developed over these family farms, and in areas under paramilitary control.

On August 6, the paramilitary organization which operates in the Mapiripán area attempted to stop the work that

Commission for Justice and Peace human rights defender, Fabio Ariza, was doing with the indigenous communities that inhabit Mapiripán.

Nine days ago, on the World Day of Indigenous Peoples, the documentary “Between Water and Palm” was launched by EIA in the United States and the Commission for Justice and Peace in Colombia (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz).

For two years William Aljure has been leading processes to strengthen organizing efforts in the region and is a part of CONPAZ, Communities Constructing Peace in Territories (Comunidades Construyendo Paz en los Territorios).

This is not the first time William has received threats of aggression. However, it is the first time that death threats been made due to his brave decision to speak the truth and affirm rights to justice in the face of abuses and irregularities committed by the company Poligrow, which has denied local community members their rights to water, land, and a clean environment.

Bogota, Colombia. August 19, 2015.

Commission for Justice and Peace

¹ Global Witness. “How Many More: 2014’s deadly environment: the killing and intimidation of environmental and land activists, with a spotlight on Honduras.” April 20, 2015. <https://www.globalwitness.org/campaigns/environmental-activists/how-many-more/>