

**COLOMBIA: BACKGROUND**

**BP/Colombia: Allegations of human rights violations and environmental damage**

1. In June this year the first article on BP's activities written by freelance journalist Michael Gillard appeared in the Scotland on Sunday paper. In this he alleged that BP photographs and films of meetings with local communities had been passed to the military authorities who had used the pictures to identify and remove the community leaders. The inference was that BP were actively involved in assisting the Colombian military to kill dissenters.

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2. The story was picked up by the Daily Express on 12 July and the New York Times in August with the latter concentrating on the contributions that BP were making to the running costs of the army units deployed to protect their installations. Subsequent articles in the Daily Telegraph and Observer have echoed these themes since August. Press coverage in Colombia, however, has been extremely limited.

3. In addition to the alleged human rights violations, BP are also accused of environmental damage, including river pollution, caused by their operations.

4. In the latest episode, Richard Howitt, MEP, raised in the European Parliament the question of BP's involvement in environmental and human rights violations in Colombia following his recent visit there. His sources appear to be the same as those used by Gillard plus a draft report prepared for the Colombian government.

5. BP have defended themselves robustly. They have never denied that they make payments to the Colombian military to support the costs of keeping units close to their installations, but they deny emphatically that they have knowingly assisted the military to root out local trouble makers.

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6. The Colombian Foreign Ministry has issued a communique refuting allegations of human rights violations by BP. The text states that the operations of BP in Colombia have been carried out in conformity with the constitution and with Colombian laws, and in permanent coordination with the national, regional and local authorities. It refers to a non-official report produced in 1995 by an Inter-Institutional Committee, which recorded statements by the authorities and local community of the Department of Casanare, but which did not accuse BP of organising or financing "paramilitary groups", or of encouraging actions incompatible with the state of law. Moreover, the report refers to actions undertaken by

British Petroleum as representing a significant contribution to the economic and social development of the country, which have undoubtedly helped to strengthen close UK/Colombia economic and commercial links.

- C 7. The FCO has taken the line ( in a PQ answer - we have not been asked by the press) that we are aware of the allegations, but not of any evidence which gives them substance. HMA
- D Bogota has expressed his confidence publicly that allegations are wholly unfounded, and has pointed to very favourable comments of well-qualified independent experts on BP's social and environmental policies in Colombia. He has reported to us that many observers believe this to be an ELN (left-wing guerrilla group) ploy to discredit BP.