

BOGOTA (AP) — Human rights groups accused the army of killing a community leader at a remote town in northwest Colombia that has long tried to isolate itself from the country's civil war by barring all armed groups from entering. The military said it was investigating the case, but that preliminary findings indicated the man died during a gunfight with leftist rebels.

Arlen Salas, a village leader in San José de Apartado, a town in the violence-wracked Uraba district near the border with Panama, was with a group of peasant farmers cultivating corn fields when they were attacked Thursday by members of the army's 17th Brigade, said the Bogotá-based Network of Non-Governmental Human Rights Defenders.

"When the soldiers saw them, they opened fire and threw a grenade that landed next to Arlen," the organization said in a statement Saturday. "When the shooting stopped, (the peasant farmers) went to help Arlen but he was already dead."

Another rights group, the Lawyers' Union, said Salas died of wounds sustained from grenade shrapnel.

Attorney General Mario Iguaran said Saturday he was sending a group of independent experts to try to uncover the facts.

San José de Apartado was the scene of a brutal massacre in March in which eight peasants, including four children, were hacked to death and their bodies dumped in a shallow grave. Community leaders and rights groups blamed the army, saying that soldiers, suspecting the guerrillas had infiltrated the community, carried out the massacre in retaliation for a rebel ambush that killed 19 members of the 17th Brigade.

But several independent investigations were inconclusive and nobody has been charged. The latest killing has nevertheless put the Colombian armed forces' human rights record under renewed scrutiny. The military has long been accused of committing abuses against civilians as it battles a 40-year-old leftist insurgency that kills thousands of people every year, although the U.S. State Department earlier this year said "respect for human rights improved in some areas."

The 17th Brigade's commander, Gen. Luis Alfonso Zapata, said Saturday that his troops were involved in a gunfight with fighters of the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, on the same day that Salas died. One unidentified "woman terrorist" is known to have been killed in the fighting and several assault rifles seized, he said.

"The death of Mr. Arlen Salas could have been a consequence of the same clashes with members of the outlawed (FARC) group," Zapata said, before adding that the "events are the subject of an investigation."

Fighting between Marxist rebels, outlawed right-wing paramilitary groups and government forces has for years plagued the sweltering, banana-growing region of Uraba, a strategic corridor for drugs and arms smuggling through Central America.

San José de Apartado was declared a "peace community" seven years ago in an attempt to

stop the violence from engulfing the town and its outlying villages. But at least 165 members of the community have been killed since then, according to the Rev. Javier Giraldo, a Roman Catholic priest who was worked to bring peace to the area.