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At Least 100 Members Of UFO Cult Missing In

From: Stig Agermose <stig.agermose@get2net.dk>
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Links are preceded by an asterisk.

Stig

UFO Cult Disappears in Colombia

Reuters

5:00 p.m. 8.Jul.99.PDT

**

At least 100 members of a religious cult were missing in northern Colombia after they went to rendezvous with a UFO they believed would save them from "the end of the world," relatives said on Thursday.

"My daughter told me she had to leave because a cataclysm was going to occur, and that she had to go to a high place to meet extraterrestrials who would save them from the end of the world," said Andrea de Echenique, whose daughter, Maria Bernarda, is among the missing.

The followers of the so-called Stella Maris Church, which describes itself as a gnostic organization, headed out to the Sierra Nevada mountains in two groups on Friday and over the weekend.

A police spokesman in the Caribbean resort of Cartagena, where most of the cult members lived, said they had received reports that the group had disappeared.

Up until now, there had been no known reports of doomsday cults operating in Colombia. But in 1978, South America was the scene of the worst mass suicide ever when more than 900 American followers of the People's Temple killed themselves in Jonestown, Guyana.

Cartagena police said, however, that no search operation had been mounted since there was no indication that the Stella Maris cult was planning mass suicide, or that any of the members had been forced to go along against their will.

"The leader of the group told them the world was going to end in August and that they had to go to the Sierra Nevada to meet some aliens," said Pedro Perez. Four of his relatives are missing

with the other cult members.

Leaders of a gnostic group in Bogota said it did not have any links with the Stella Maris group but had heard reports of its beliefs.

"People had told us that certain practices of the Stella Maris group were fanatical and dogmatic.... Over the last two years they had been talking about a meeting with UFOs," said Wilson Martinez, a gnostic "archbishop" in Bogota.

Martinez said gnostics believe in the spiritual but not the historical existence of Christ and looked to "free their souls with knowledge."

Family members have accused Rogelio Perea, self-styled head of the Stella Maris cult, of swindling his followers out of their homes, property, and money. They also say he forced members to sever ties with their families.

"The two leaders told my daughter Liliana that she was God's chosen one and made her change her name to Stella Maris to brainwash her. She was convinced she was going to make contact with flying saucers," said Mariela Tovar.

But others close to the Stella Maris group believe its 100 or so members have simply gone on a routine spiritual retreat and accuse relatives and the media of exaggerating the story.

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