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Colombia: Amnesty International condemns attacks against the population of Toribío

"From the school we could see how little by little they were destroying our small town."
Testimony given by Leader of the indigenous peace community of Toribío

Once again the guerrillas are in breach of international humanitarian law through their indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force, Amnesty International said today in response to reports of combat between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the security forces in an area populated by members of indigenous communities over the last few days.

Attacks carried out by members of the FARC on 14 and 17 April against security force units in the indigenous community of Toribío, in the south-eastern department of Cauca, have resulted in numerous civilian casualties. During the 14 April attack some 11 civilians were reportedly wounded and ten-year-old Yanson Trochez Pavi shot dead. Three police officers, five soldiers and eight guerrillas were also reportedly killed.

On 17 April a FARC attack wounded eight civilians, and initial reports suggest that the casualties were injured both by the FARC and by the security forces during efforts to repel the guerrilla attack. Little effort was apparently made by either side to avoid civilian casualties. The FARC reportedly used gas cylinders in the attacks, with 25 fired at military targets on 14 April alone, while the security forces reportedly used aerial strafing in their response.

Gas cylinders, which are notoriously inaccurate, used by the FARC against military targets is an indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force. Their use has resulted in numerous civilian casualties. In May 2002, 119 civilians died when the FARC fired a gas cylinder at paramilitaries positioned behind a church where civilians were sheltering.

"Because the FARC placed the civilian population in danger from the outset by deciding to use gas cylinders, their methods can only be categorized as a deliberate violation of international humanitarian law, while aerial strafing by the security forces may have placed civilians at unnecessary risk," said Amnesty International.

"Civilians must not be dragged into the conflict. All the parties to the armed conflict must respect and uphold that right," Amnesty International continued.

Amnesty International calls on the government and guerrilla groups to urgently reach agreement on a human rights and humanitarian accord to ensure the protection of the civilian population and to guarantee that civilians are not dragged into the conflict.

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