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Colombia: Laboratory of war -- violence soars in Arauca

(Madrid) The human rights crisis in the oil-rich border region of Arauca is worsening as the warring parties intensify their efforts to control by force the department's natural resources, Amnesty International warned today.

The crisis in Arauca, which lies along Colombia's northern border with Venezuela, has been fuelled by the government's two-year military and security offensive in the area, supported by paramilitaries and powerful international, mainly US, military and economic interests.

Guerrilla groups, which have a longstanding presence in Arauca, have responded by repeatedly and increasingly breaching international humanitarian law in an attempt to repel the military and paramilitary advance.

In a new report published today, Amnesty International condemned the government's counter-insurgency strategy in Arauca, which has turned the department into a violent testing ground for many of its new security policies, which form part of its so-called "Democratic Security" strategy.

"The policies of the Colombian government have led to increasing levels of human rights violations and impunity. As is usual in Colombia, it is the civilian population that is suffering the most," said Amnesty International.

The Colombian armed forces, paramilitaries, and guerrilla groups have significantly boosted their presence in the department. This has turned Arauca into one of the most militarized and violent regions in the country.

Guerrilla groups are targeting civilians, particularly local state officials. They are abusing international humanitarian law by repeatedly carrying out disproportionate attacks on military targets often using low-precision bombs and mortars. These attacks often result in civilian casualties.

The armed forces, in collaboration with paramilitary groups, are directly involved in killings, torture and "disappearances". They have stepped-up efforts to intimidate human rights defenders, peasant leaders and social activists. Often putting them in danger by labelling them as guerrillas or guerrilla sympathisers.

By silencing these groups - at the forefront of denunciations of human rights violations committed by the army, their paramilitary allies and guerrilla groups - the authorities can maintain the fiction that the human rights situation is improving.

Paramilitaries, who established a firm foothold in Arauca in the wake of large-scale operations carried out by the Colombian security forces in the area in recent years, continue to kill and threaten civilians despite a year-long self-declared ceasefire.

"Arauca is on the front-line of Colombia's human rights crisis. Far from restoring order, the government's security strategy has made the department an even more dangerous place to live," Amnesty International said.

"The USA's support for military units operating in Arauca illustrates how the international community is turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Colombia. Protection of civilians should take priority over economic and strategic interests, and is the most effective route to security in the region."

The Colombian government's security measures include recently introduced anti-terrorist legislation, and Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones, special security areas set up in 2002, which are no longer legally in operation but continue to be used by the security forces to target civilian populations.

For a full copy of the report "Colombia: A laboratory of war: Repression and Violence in Arauca", please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR230042004>

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