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Colombia: Latest killing of human rights defender throws controversial paramilitary demobilization process into further doubt

Amnesty International condemns the killing of human rights defender Yolanda Izquierdo in the city of Montería, Córdoba Department, on 31 January. Yolanda Izquierdo was reportedly shot several times by gunmen suspected of being linked to army-backed paramilitary groups.

Yolanda Izquierdo had been the victim of several death threats since December 2006 and had days previously reported them to the local authorities and requested protection. These threats are believed to have stemmed from her work representing survivors of paramilitary human rights violations at the demobilization hearing of paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso.

The killing was clearly designed to silence those brave enough to speak out against the human rights violations, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, committed by paramilitaries such as Salvatore Mancuso, and by those who have supported the paramilitaries, either politically, economically or militarily, including members of the security forces, as well as powerful economic and political interests.

The killing of Yolanda Izquierdo once again raises serious doubts about a supposed demobilization process that continues to disregard the right of victims to truth, justice and reparation and which has patently failed to effectively dismantle paramilitary groups.

Amnesty International has repeatedly warned that paramilitary groups continue to operate and to violate human rights throughout the country, despite Colombian government assurances that over 30,000 combatants have demobilized.

Amnesty International calls on the relevant national authorities to immediately initiate a thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Yolanda Izquierdo and to adopt the necessary measures to protect those witnesses wishing to participate in the hearings.

Background Information

Since 2003, paramilitary groups have been involved in a government-sponsored process to demobilize their combatants. Under the legal framework introduced to facilitate this “demobilization” process – principally the Justice and Peace Law -- those members of illegal armed groups who wish to qualify for the procedural benefits contained in the Justice and Peace Law must participate in special hearings in which they must reveal details of any human rights violations they may have committed.

