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Colombia: Internally displaced people face elections with few options

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In a letter made public today, Amnesty International urged Colombia's presidential candidates to make public their plans of action to tackle the country's human rights crisis, particularly the impact of the recent demobilization of army-backed paramilitaries on the country's internally displaced population.

More than 3 million people have been forced to leave their homes by paramilitaries, the guerrillas, and the security forces since 1985. Tens of thousands of others have been killed, "disappeared", tortured or kidnapped.

A number of government initiatives, including Decree 4760 and the "rural reinsertion" programme, now threaten to ensure that demobilized paramilitaries could maintain control over the millions of hectares of land they have stolen.

Demobilized paramilitaries could become eligible for grants to develop agricultural projects in the very same lands they took by force, often through human rights violations and with the support of the security forces. These projects would bring together peasant farmers, displaced peoples and demobilized paramilitaries. Supposedly demobilized paramilitaries would count for half the people involved in each project.

A number of paramilitary groups have already announced their intention to promote economic development projects for their members and the local community in areas they already control.

"In practice, hundreds of thousands of people in Colombia could be faced with a lethal dilemma: either continue to be homeless or move back to their land and live with the very same people who tortured, raped and killed their loved ones and forced them to move out in the first place," said Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International's Colombia Researcher.

Amnesty International has called on the international community not to legitimize paramilitary control over such lands by funding agricultural projects of this kind.

In the letter, Amnesty International also urges the presidential candidates to use their campaigning

platforms to publicly express support for the introduction of a human-rights based legal framework for the demobilization of illegal armed groups. Any legal framework should be in line with UN recommendations and ensure the return of land stolen by paramilitaries to their rightful owners or their descendants.

"If they are serious about leading the country, all the presidential candidates must develop credible proposals to tackle Colombia's human rights crisis. Failure to do so would put them at risk of being part of the problem," said Javier Zúñiga, Amnesty International's Americas Programme Director.

Amnesty International also calls on the candidates to publicly commit to:

- Acknowledging the human rights crisis and the internal armed conflict affecting millions in the country;
- complying with international human rights recommendations, including to end impunity;
- ensuring full respect of human rights and international humanitarian law by the security forces;
- signing a humanitarian agreement with the guerrilla groups to shield the civilian population from the conflict;
- defending the rights of human rights defenders and social activists to carry out their work; and
- protecting those civilians most at risk – including women and indigenous peoples.

Background Information

Presidential elections in Colombia are due to take place on 28 May.

Decree 4760 was promulgated on 31 December 2005 to regulate implementation of the Justice and Peace Law, which was approved in 2005 to facilitate the demobilization of paramilitary and guerrilla groups.

For a full copy of "Colombia: Open Letter to the Presidential Candidates", please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR230132006>

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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