

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 23/029/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 156
17 June 2004

Colombia: Amnesty International is always with the victims of human rights violations and abuses, whoever the perpetrators are

Amnesty International (AI) strenuously and categorically rejects the serious accusations made by President Álvaro Uribe to the effect that the organization "does not condemn violations of international humanitarian law committed by guerrilla groups" and that "it legitimizes terrorism".

"The accusations made by the President on 16 June 2004 during a promotion ceremony for Colombian police are untrue and unacceptable. In its reports and publications, AI has repeatedly criticized and condemned violations of international humanitarian law committed by guerrilla groups as well as abuses committed by the paramilitaries or state forces. We would ask President Uribe to read our reports thoroughly before making such unfounded and false accusations."

The massacre of 34 people in La Gabarra on 15 June, attributed by the authorities to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, is reprehensible and, if evidence emerges that the victims were defenceless at the time of death, would constitute a very grave breach of international humanitarian law amounting to a war crime. "AI is calling for an urgent in-depth investigation, for the perpetrators to be brought to justice and for the authorities to provide protection and humanitarian aid to the survivors and the victims' relatives".

In his speech, the President wondered, "Whose side is Amnesty International on?". The answer is, and always has been, that Amnesty International is on the side of the victims of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, whoever the perpetrators are. Amnesty International wonders whether the government is similarly committed to the victims. Why does it persist in implementing policies that are contrary to the recommendations on human rights made by the United Nations? What AI and the international community see is the promotion of policies that foster impunity and send a message to the armed actors in the conflict in Colombia that they can continue to carry out atrocities without being brought to justice."

Instead of responding to legitimate international concerns about his policies, President Uribe appears to be trying to divert public attention by attacking those who are working to defend human rights. "Once again we see how this government is trying to delegitimize human rights organizations in order to hide the true extent of the human rights crisis and its responsibility for it".

These attacks on Amnesty International are taking place at a time when the Colombian Government is trying to get support from the European Union for the process of

dialogue with the paramilitaries and the peace process it is trying to start with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), National Liberation Army, a guerrilla group. Amnesty International hopes that the international community will remain firm in its insistence that such processes should not end up guaranteeing impunity for the perpetrators of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The President says that he doesn't want "to respect niceties" in his dealings with Amnesty International. Amnesty International is also not interested in formal niceties. It wants the Colombian Government to demonstrate that it is truly committed to human rights.

For further information, please contact the Amnesty International press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5562 Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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