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EU - Latin America: Commitment needed to protect right to defend human rights

The judicial systems of the Americas are being misused to harass human rights defenders. This is affecting their ability to carry out important human rights work, said Amnesty International as EU and Latin American states gather in Mexico to discuss the issues of social cohesion and regional integration.

"It is ironic that, while governments meet to discuss issues such as social cohesion and regional integration, human rights defenders -- key partners in the achievement of those objectives -- have no place on the agenda."

In Colombia, one of the most dangerous countries to be a human rights defender, there are ongoing judicial investigations on charges of corruption and rebellion against members of the organization "Justice and Peace." They appear to form part of a strategy designed to discredit the organization, divert attention from legitimate human rights work and punish activists for seeking accountability of high ranking military officials implicated in human rights violations.

Amnesty International is calling on the Colombian authorities to ensure investigations against members of Justice and Peace comply with domestic and international standards regarding the right to adequate defence and fair trial.

In Mexico, indigenous leaders Isidro Baldenegro López and Hermenegildo Rivas Carrillo have been imprisoned for over a year on the basis of fabricated evidence because of their campaign to stop logging in community forests. Despite clear evidence that the criminal charges are fabricated, the authorities continue to seek their prosecution. Amnesty International is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

"Isidoro, Hermenegildo and the members of Justice and Peace symbolize the reality that hundreds of human rights defenders live on a daily basis," said Amnesty International. "The situation is now so serious that concerted efforts are required at the regional and international level to address these abuses."

Events around the world, such as the recent exposure of cases of torture and illegal killings in Iraq, have underlined the essential role human rights campaigners play in ensuring appalling abuses are not covered up or committed with impunity.

"The defence of human rights is an essential part of public life, human rights activists must be free to carry out their activities on human rights without fear of punishment or reprisals," said Amnesty International.

The EU has made commitments to give priority to threats and dangers faced by human rights defenders. Equally, Latin American and Caribbean governments have affirmed their commitment to protecting human rights defenders in several resolutions by the Organization of American States (OAS).

"This is an invaluable opportunity for countries from both continents to unite in efforts to put into practice those commitments and address the dangers facing human rights activists from all sectors of society."

"The work of human rights defenders is intrinsic to the delivery of the objectives of the summit" said Amnesty International. "It is now time for governments to acknowledge this and take concrete steps to protect the right to defend human rights."

Background information

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders describes defenders as all those individuals, groups and organs of society that promote and protect universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms. In other words, human rights defenders are all those women and men who act on their own or collectively to contribute to the effective elimination of all violations of the fundamental rights and freedoms of peoples and individuals. This work includes, but is not exclusive to, the search for truth and justice and strengthening the rule of law, the strengthening of democratic governance and accountability, the struggle for gender, racial and sexual equality, the protection of economic, social and cultural rights and the rights of indigenous peoples, the struggle against environmental degradation, hunger, disease and poverty, the struggle for a fair standard of living, education and medical attention, the struggle to end war and arms proliferation and to provide urgent assistance to victims of conflict or natural disasters. Defenders work in various spheres of society and their work is inspired and guided by internationally recognised human rights standards.

For more information on the situation of human rights defenders in the Americas, please see: "Essential actors of our time': Human rights defenders in the Americas" on: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR010092003>

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