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Colombia: Torture on the rise. New Amnesty International report on human rights violations

In a new report on torture in Colombia, Amnesty International renews its call on the Colombian government to strengthen its efforts to combat this horrendous practice and to end impunity.

The report is being launched when the United Nations Committee Against Torture is presenting its concluding observations regarding the situation of torture in Colombia.

Amnesty International has documented information indicating that the widespread practice of torture carried out by the Colombian security forces, their paramilitary allies and the armed opposition groups is on the rise in the country.

Recent data relating to torture indicates that between July 1996 and June 2001 over 1,200 people were tortured, of these over 88% were subsequently killed.

Reports indicate that in around 55% of the cases, torture is committed by army-backed paramilitaries, 11% directly by the security forces and almost 7% by armed opposition groups. In the remaining cases responsibility is not known.

During 2002 more than 4,000 civilians were killed for political motives, over 1,000 people "disappeared", over 400,000 were displaced and at least 2,700 people were abducted, some 1,500 of whom were abducted by armed opposition groups and paramilitaries.

Amnesty International is concerned that the government's policies are designed to strengthen impunity in cases of human rights violations, including torture, to cover up human rights violations from the view of national and international public opinion and to silence those sectors which denounce and investigate human rights violations.

In this context, the government is creating the conditions under which the practice of torture may continue unabated, and could even increase.

Amnesty International's new report includes numerous examples of cases of torture, among those:

José Amancio Niasa Arce, a 15-year-old student, who was forced, from the bus in which he was travelling by troops belonging to the Batallón Manosalva Florez, Manosalva Florez Battalion. His body, which

reportedly bore signs of torture, was found several days later in a military-style uniform.

Several members of the Organización Femenina Popular (OFP), Popular Women's Organization who denounced cases of torture and inhuman, degrading and cruel treatment in Barrancabermeja, Santander Department, and surrounding communities by army-backed paramilitary groups against youths and women during 2002.

Juan Carlos Celis González, a human rights defender. On 11 December 2002, members of the police forced their way into his home, handcuffed him, pushed him to the ground, pointed a gun at him, covered his head with a jacket and forced him to admit that he was "El Ingeniero", someone supposedly responsible for planting car bombs in Bogotá.

Juan Carlos Celis, as well as other prisoners in Cómbita prison, in the department of Boyacá, have been left exposed for long periods of time to the sun and rain. Together with other prisoners he has reportedly been given rotten food or food which appears to have been contaminated.

General Information

The United Nations Committee Against Torture has once again reiterated its concerns regarding the widespread use of torture by security forces and state officials in Colombia, when presenting its concluding observations today in Geneva.

The committee has also highlighted its concerns regarding new anti-terrorist legislation that is being approved or is in the course of being adopted in Colombia, which would justify the use of torture.

Measures proposed include giving judicial powers to the military forces and suspending penalties for armed groups that disarm their forces voluntarily, even if they're accused of torture crimes and other serious human rights violations. This will foment impunity even more.

The committee's report concludes with a series of recommendations to the Colombian authorities, including taking effective measures to end impunity on torture cases and to have prompt, impartial and exhaustive investigations in order to bring to justice those responsible for torture.

For a full copy of the report, please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr230662003>

Public Document

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