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COLOMBIA: OPEN LETTER TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

Colombian presidential candidates Gustavo Petro and Iván Duque,

Amnesty International is addressing this letter to you to express some of our main concerns regarding human rights in Colombia, and to obtain a real commitment from you on this issue.

For more than 40 years we have been supporting victims of human rights violations, social movements, historically marginalized communities, human rights organizations and Colombian society in general in the fight to defend human rights. Through our campaigns and research, we have helped expose human rights violations relating to issues such as land restitution and access to justice, truth and full reparation for victims of the armed conflict. We believe that the country is at a historic juncture and that the next government's commitment to guaranteeing the human rights of the segments of the population that have been most severely affected by the violence will depend on the sustainability of lasting peace-building processes.

On a number of occasions, Amnesty International has reiterated that effective implementation of the Peace Agreement signed in November 2016 with the FARC guerrillas could help ensure non-repetition of such crimes and improve the living conditions of populations that have been subjected to violence. However, in departments such as Chocó, Cauca, Nariño and Norte de Santander, crimes under international law and serious human rights violations persist, such as targeted killings of members of Afro-Colombian communities and Indigenous Peoples, collective forced displacements, confinement of communities, forced recruitment of children, sexual violence and use of anti-personnel landmines.¹

Although official figures indicate a reduction in deaths from armed combat, it remains worrying that in some parts of the country armed confrontations persist between National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas, paramilitary groups and state forces, and even FARC dissident groups as a result of the power vacuums left by FARC in some territories after the signing of the Agreement. It is also worrying that armed conflict continues to be a reality for millions of Colombians.

Another matter of concern for the organization is the rise, since November 2016, in the number of killings and threats targeting human rights defenders, including those in social leadership positions. The limited measures taken by the Colombian State have so far failed to mitigate the risks facing those who defend the rights of victims of the internal armed conflict, human rights linked to land and territory, and collective rights. This disheartening situation is largely the result of the power vacuums left following the demobilization of the FARC guerrilla movement and the lack of action by the state to increase its presence in historically neglected territories affected by the armed conflict, beyond isolated military operations.

Whoever is elected on 17 June will face the challenge of ensuring that the process of guaranteeing human rights in Colombia is implemented as a state policy. Therefore, the organization considers it essential to have your commitment on the following points:

¹ Amnesty International submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review, 30th session of the UPR working group, May 2018, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR2373572017ENGLISH.PDF>

1. Guarantee the **human rights of Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Colombian communities**, particularly to ensure the protection of their livelihoods, their full political participation and their cultural survival. Amnesty International calls for your commitment to develop and implement urgent measures that guarantee the collective protection of indigenous reserves and Afro-Colombian community councils in areas of armed conflict in the country, primarily based on consultations with their leaders and representative organizations.²
2. **Protect the rights of human rights activists**³ and acknowledge their work. Amnesty International considers it vitally important to secure the commitment of the state to safeguard the lives, freedom, physical integrity and safety of human rights defenders. The widespread violence and the attacks against human rights activists must not be allowed to continue under the cloak of impunity. The individual and collective protection of human rights defenders in situations of risk must be one of the priorities of the next government.
3. **Guarantee the rights of victims of the armed conflict to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition** as one of the main pillars to eliminate the structural causes of violence in the country. Impunity for crimes under international law and serious human rights violations such as forced displacement, sexual violence against women and girls, and so on, must not prevail in a context of peace-building. This was one of the recommendations that Amnesty International made in the United Nations Human Rights Council's last Universal Periodic Review of Colombia, on which the Colombian state undertook to make progress without delay.
4. **Commit the Colombian state to dismantling any paramilitary structures** that still exist despite their supposed demobilization in 2005 and give impetus to criminal investigations into the alleged complicity of state agencies with such structures.

Amnesty International calls on the candidates, for the remainder of their campaigns until the elections on 17 June, to make clear, specific proposals regarding human rights and to commit to implementing them during their first months in office, ensuring they are continued through concrete, sustainable policies. The populations affected by the armed conflict in Colombia cannot be kept waiting for the leaders of the government of the day to decide to take action to protect them and guarantee decent living conditions in their territories. It is time for the state as a whole to acknowledge this historic juncture and take decisive action to end violence and guarantee human rights in every corner of the country.

² Report "The years of solitude continue: The Peace Agreement and guarantees of non-repetition in Chocó", published in November 2017, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR2374252017ENGLISH.PDF>

³ Public Statement on threats against and killings of human rights activists in Colombia, April 2018, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR2381902018ENGLISH.PDF>.