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Bolivia: Trade unionist's death must not go unpunished

Amnesty International has strongly condemned the killing yesterday of peasant trade union leader Casimiro Huanca Colque, who died after being shot at pointblank range following his arrest by security forces during a peaceful demonstration of coca-leaf growers in Chimore.

The peasants were protesting at the lack of markets for crops grown as an alternative to coca leaf production. During the protest, teargas was used against the peasants and one demonstrator was injured after being shot in the leg by soldiers who, according to witnesses, had already immobilized him.

"Given the violent reaction of the security forces which witnesses say appeared unjustified, it is essential for there to be an immediate and thorough investigation into what happened so that those responsible for the death of Casimiro Huanca can be identified and anyone who has made excessive use of force can be brought to justice," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization stressed that all forces entrusted with the maintenance of public order must act within the framework of the law at all times and abide by international standards governing the use of force by law enforcement officers.

The Interior Minister has reportedly announced that, if the government is found to be responsible, the victims will receive compensation. Amnesty International emphasized that, "according to Bolivia's international commitments, the government is not freed of its obligation to prevent, investigate and punish all violations of human rights by paying financial compensation."

In response to numerous reports of human rights violations linked to the program for eradicating coca-leaf crops. Amnesty International said, "It is totally unacceptable for the fundamental human rights of Bolivians to be sacrificed in the name of the 'war against drugs trafficking'."

"The Bolivian State must stop the recurrence of such serious abuses," Amnesty International insisted.

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