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COLOMBIA: GOVERNMENT SHOULD OPPOSE MOVES TO REINFORCE IMPUNITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATORS

Amnesty International expressed grave concern today at the planned presentation to the Colombian Congress of a bill which would allow human rights violators to go unpunished. The announcement of the bill comes just days after the massacre of fourteen people by paramilitaries allied to the security forces.

Legislators, backed by the security and armed forces, want to reform the Colombian Constitution to give exclusive jurisdiction over all investigations into human rights violations to the military justice system. Amnesty International is calling on the Colombian government to take a strong position against the proposed reforms.

“It is ridiculous to imagine that impartial disciplinary investigations can be carried out into human rights violations by the institution which in many cases is ultimately responsible for ordering these violations,” Amnesty International said.

“The proposed changes to the Colombian Constitution only serve to increase the probability of massacres such as the one which took place on 22 April in the town of Segovia being repeated.”

Two days ago, the Chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights expressed concern at ‘the alarming level of impunity’ in Colombia, and called on the government to take decisive measures to tackle the impunity which members of the security forces responsible for human rights violations enjoy.

The adoption of this proposed legislation would fly in the face of the concern expressed by the Commission, Amnesty International said. The Colombian government has said in the past that it is committed to taking measures to protect the victims of human rights violations. It should therefore oppose any reforms which are aimed at protecting the perpetrators of violations.

BACKGROUND

A package of five bills will be presented to the Colombian Congress for debate in the next few days. Amongst these is a bill which would reform Article 220 of the 1991 Colombian Constitution. At present this article enables the Procurator General’s Office (an autonomous civilian body) to conduct disciplinary investigations and pass disciplinary sanctions against members of the security and armed forces responsible human rights violations. The bill seeks to give the security and the armed forces exclusive jurisdiction to carry out their own disciplinary investigations

Colombian security and armed forces officials together with some Colombian politicians point to abuses of international humanitarian law committed by guerrilla organizations in an attempt to argue that they are being victimized by investigations whilst guerrilla abuses remain unheeded by the authorities. Amnesty International believes that abuses by armed opposition groups does not abrogate a government's responsibility to investigate human rights violations and ensure that those responsible are brought justice.

Government failure to take a determined stand against legislation extending mechanisms of impunity would demonstrate a total lack of political will to respect the UN Commission on Human Rights and its recommendations.

For more information on Amnesty International's concerns in Colombia, or to arrange an interview, please call:

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