

Public Statement

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External -- For response

Amnesty International's position on Plan Colombia

The Colombian Government has presented to the international community an aid package known as APlan Colombia@. The Plan - presented as the means by which the international community can support the peace process between the Colombian government and armed opposition groups - is seeking around one and a half billion US dollars from the United States of America and some two billion US dollars from Japan, Canada, the European Union, Switzerland, other western governments and international financial institutions.

According to the Colombian government: "...the government has drawn up Plan Colombia, which in the framework of a peace building policy, [has] joined together strategies for negotiations with the guerrillas, the protection of human rights, the strengthening of the state, the recovery of the economy, control on the expansion of unlawful crops, and the protection of the environment".

Amnesty International believes it is of vital importance that the international community seek effective ways of contributing to ending the human rights crisis and to achieving a settlement of the armed conflict in Colombia. However, the organization has serious concerns regarding the impact of Plan Colombia on human rights and the armed conflict.

Plan Colombia is based on a drug-focussed analysis of the roots of the conflict and the human rights crisis which completely ignores the Colombian state=s own historical and current responsibility. It also ignores deep-rooted causes of the conflict and the human rights crisis. The Plan proposes a principally military strategy (in the US component of Plan Colombia) to tackle illicit drug cultivation and trafficking through substantial military assistance to the Colombian armed forces and police.

Social development and humanitarian assistance programs included in the Plan cannot disguise its essentially military character. Furthermore, it is apparent that Plan Colombia is not the result of a genuine process of consultation either with the national and international non-governmental organizations which are expected to implement the projects nor with the beneficiaries of the humanitarian, human rights or social development projects. As a consequence, the human rights component of Plan Colombia is seriously flawed.

1. Amnesty International opposes the military aid program for Colombia because the organization believes that it will escalate the armed conflict and the human rights crisis. The organization has documented overwhelming evidence of the responsibility of illegal paramilitary organizations for widespread, systematic and gross human rights violations. There is also conclusive evidence that paramilitary groups continue to operate with the tacit or active support of the Colombian armed forces. Evidence has also emerged that Colombian army personnel trained by US special forces have been implicated by action or omission in serious human rights violations, including the massacre of civilians. Military equipment provided by the US to the Colombian armed forces has reportedly been used in the commission of human rights violations against civilians. Amnesty International does not believe that mechanisms are in place to ensure that future weapons transfers to the Colombian armed forces will not be transferred to illegal paramilitary organizations

or will not be used by the military to facilitate human rights violations by paramilitary or their own forces. As long as the Colombian government fails to disband paramilitary groups allied with the Colombian armed forces, US military aid to the Colombian armed forces inevitably risks exacerbating the human rights crisis. Moreover, military operations contemplated in the Plan anticipate the internal displacement of tens of thousands of Colombians thereby aggravating an existing humanitarian crisis of alarming proportions.

2. AI is also concerned that paramilitary organizations may be employed as part of the military strategy contemplated in Plan Colombia. Although a formal role is not acknowledged in Plan Colombia, their recently established presence in key areas targeted for military operations (Putumayo department and the Catatumbo region of North Santander) would appear to be more than coincidental. The paramilitary strategy of attacking and eliminating civilian organizational and grassroots structures is designed to anticipate and prevent any organized opposition to the military eradication of illicit crops.

3. The organization is also concerned about the consequences of any financial support for infrastructure or other development projects which will inevitably fuel land speculation in those regions. Such speculation may encourage the development of paramilitary activity in those areas in order to seize control of assets (land or other) in order to capitalize on their increase in value. Any economic development project funding cannot, therefore, be separated from the issue of human rights. It is essential to prioritize action on combatting and dismantling paramilitary groups in advance of the dispersal of funds to ensure that aid for development projects does not, even inadvertently, encourage paramilitary activity and human rights violations.

4. The human rights assistance component of Plan Colombia is inadequate and largely misdirected. It fails to address the principal causes of the human rights crisis identified by the UN and other international bodies including the root causes of impunity and the need to combat illegal paramilitary organizations. Unless the Colombian government adopts international recommendations and acts on these two key fronts, human rights programs contained in Plan Colombia will be little more than cosmetic.

5. Humanitarian assistance programs for internally displaced persons fail to address the causes of displacement and are merely designed to mitigate its consequences and thereby reduce the visibility of the internally displaced, including those people displaced as a consequence of the Plan's military operations.

6. The framework for international support for human rights in Colombia must be the recommendations made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and other UN human rights mechanisms. In particular the international community should ensure that programs it supports form part of a clear government policy to address key issues such as impunity and the dismantling of paramilitary organizations. Respect for human rights is an essential pre-requisite to achieving a negotiated resolution of the armed conflict. Only by ensuring that fundamental civil and political rights are protected can Colombia hope to achieve genuine national reconciliation based on peace and justice.

Amnesty International opposes Plan Colombia for the reasons given above. However, the organization believes that it is essential that the international community engage more actively with Colombia and that it find ways of contributing to ending human rights violations and to achieving a genuine and lasting settlement to the conflict. As a first

urgent step, the international community should demand that the Colombian government and the parties to the conflict urgently discuss, reach and implement a verifiable agreement to fully respect fundamental human rights and international humanitarian law.

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