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Public Statement

AI Index: AMR: 23/053/2013

11 November 2013

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Colombia: victims of the Palace of Justice still waiting for justice

The victims of a decades-old emblematic case of human rights violations continue their fight to bring to justice all those suspected of criminal responsibility, said Amnesty International on the eve of a hearing on the case by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

On 12-13 November, the Court, sitting in Brasilia, Brazil, will hear evidence on the case of 12 people who were forcibly disappeared, as well as a case of extrajudicial execution and several cases of torture, following an assault by the security forces on the Palace of Justice in Bogotá in November 1985 after the M-19 guerrilla group had taken hostage those inside.

Over 100 people died in the assault, including 11 Supreme Court judges. The body of only one of the 12 victims of enforced disappearance has ever been found.

The struggle to bring to justice those suspected of criminal responsibility for the crimes under international law has been painfully slow and only two senior officers have been convicted – General Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales and Colonel Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega.

However, most of those allegedly responsible for the disappearances and other human rights violations committed during the storming of the Palace of Justice by the security forces continue to evade justice.

On 17 October 2013 the state admitted to the Inter-American Court its responsibility in the torture of two students who were in the Palace of Justice at the time of the siege, and its responsibility in failing to investigate two of the enforced disappearance cases.

But it has refused to acknowledge the responsibility of state agents in all 12 enforced disappearances and in most of the other human rights violations committed during the siege. The Inter-American Court is not expected to rule on the case until next year.

The little progress on this case has been largely due to the tenacity of the victims' families and their lawyers who have for decades campaigned tirelessly, both in Colombia and within the Inter-American human rights system, to ensure truth, justice and reparation for the victims despite ongoing threats, harassment and stigmatization.

The Colombian state continues to deny reparations to the victims of the Palace of Justice and their families, leaving them with no option but to turn to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to ensure that their fundamental and long-delayed right to truth and justice is respected.

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