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Colombia: What kind of security can there be without full respect for human rights?

At the news that the United Nations is considering what role it could play in the future Colombian peace process suggested by President-Elect Álvaro Uribe, Amnesty International today reiterated that it is absolutely essential that a humanitarian agreement to keep the civilian population out of the war should be the cornerstone of any negotiations.

"Every day in the conflict zones, hundreds of men, women and children are suffering very serious human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law," Amnesty International pointed out, adding that "tragedies such as the one that occurred recently in Bojayá, Chocó, in which 119 unarmed civilians lost their lives as a result of the use of a gas cylinder by the FARC, show how urgent it is to ensure that the lives and human rights of all civilians are fully protected."

Amnesty International is consequently deeply concerned about the plan announced by President-Elect Uribe to set up a network of one million informers to support the armed forces in the war against insurgent organizations.

"This would lead to the increased involvement of the civilian population in the conflict, thereby depriving it of the protection to which it is due under international humanitarian law. The proposal not only disregards the right of the civilian population not to be involved in conflict situations but there is also the risk that the history of the growth of paramilitarism in Colombia will be repeated and that such structures will end up serving as an adjunct to paramilitary strategy."

The organization insisted on the importance of combatting the paramilitary phenomenon and expressed its concern about the fact that, when proposing that negotiations should take place with the guerrillas and the paramilitary groups, the President-Elect did not acknowledge the links that exist between the armed forces and the paramilitary and consequently did not stress the need to combat and dismantle such groups and break their links with the security forces.

"A true peace process requires all those responsible for violations and abuses of human rights, whether they be guerrillas, paramilitaries or members of the security forces, to be brought to justice," the organization emphasized.

In the first week of May, Amnesty International held a debate with the future president and other candidates for the presidency on the issue of human rights.

"We see the statements made by Álvaro Uribe about his commitment to Colombia's international human rights obligations as positive and we hope to carry on a constructive dialogue with him on the issue," the

organization said.

"However, we would urge the future President of Colombia to place the human rights of all his fellow citizens from now on at the centre of his political programs and actions and not to allow them to be sacrificed on the altar of security," Amnesty International continued. In the organization's annual report, which was published yesterday, it expressed the firm conviction that there is no dichotomy between security and human rights and that only by fully observing human rights can there be true lasting security.

"We are also urging the future Colombian Government to take immediate concrete measures to deal firmly with the problem of the impunity which has until now shielded those responsible for the serious and repeated violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in the country and which has created an atmosphere which fosters the committing of further abuses," the organization added.

Amnesty International also said that it was worried about the proposal put forward by President-Elect Uribe to introduce anti-terrorist legislation which would grant, among other things, judicial police powers to the security forces.

"This would go against the spirit of the ruling by the Supreme Court in which it declared similar measures contained in the Law on Defence and National Security to be unconstitutional and would risk strengthening the mechanisms which have so far ensured impunity by the covering up of responsibility for human rights violations committed by both the armed forces and the paramilitary groups linked to them," the organization emphasized.

For further information, please contact the press office at Amnesty International in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5562 Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>