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Amnesty International renews calls to oil companies operating in Colombia to respect human rights

Amnesty International today called on national and international oil companies operating in Colombia to respect human rights as new evidence emerged of practices which could exacerbate the human rights crisis in the country.

The human rights organization is particularly concerned that security procedures employed by Defence Systems Colombia (DSC), a subsidiary of the UK based private security company Defence Systems Ltd, could contribute to human rights violations against the civilian population. DSC is under contract to British Petroleum, BP, to run its security operations in Colombia and, until 1997, was also contracted by OCENSA – the consortium company which owns the pipeline from the oil fields to the coast – of which BP is a partner together with other transnational oil companies.

“What is particularly alarming is that DSC/OCENSA has purchased military equipment for the Colombian army’s XIV Brigade which has an atrocious record of human rights violations,” Amnesty International said today.

At the time the equipment was purchased in 1997 – via Silver Shadow a private Israeli security company – by DSC/OCENSA, army personnel attached to the XIV Brigade were under investigation for complicity in a massacre of 15 unarmed civilians in the town of Segovia in April 1996 and for links with paramilitary organizations responsible for widespread human rights violations, including killings, “disappearances” and torture against the civilian population in the area of the Brigade’s jurisdiction.

Amnesty International is opposed to the transfer of military equipment to units implicated in serious human rights violations as it is reasonable to assume that such equipment could be used to commit further violations. The organization has also questioned BP officials on what basis DSC/OCENSA used an Israeli security company as procurement agent in the purchase of military equipment for the XIV Brigade.

“The relation with Israeli private security companies is potentially of concern given that in the past such companies have provided mercenaries, of Israeli and British and German nationality, to train paramilitary organizations operating under the control of the XIV Brigade,” Amnesty International said. “These same paramilitary organizations have then been responsible for widespread atrocities against the civilian population.”

Foreign oil companies operating in Colombia are considered military targets by armed opposition groups and are frequently exposed to attack. They clearly have genuine security concerns and a responsibility to protect their employees. Yesterday, at 12:20am, an explosion on the OCENSA pipeline reportedly resulted in the destruction of approximately 60 houses in the community of Machuca, jurisdiction of Fraguas de Segovia, municipality of Segovia, department of Antioquia, leaving at least 47 people dead. Amnesty International has said that if this explosion was the result of a deliberate attack then it represents an atrocity and flagrant violation of international humanitarian law.

Amnesty International is concerned, however, that according to information provided to *The Guardian* newspaper by a former OCENSA employee, OCENSA/DSC has adopted a security strategy which could directly or indirectly contribute to serious human rights violations against the civilian population.

“What is disturbing is that OCENSA/DSC’s security strategy reportedly relies heavily on paid informants whose purpose is to covertly gather ‘intelligence information’ on the activities of the local population in the communities through which the pipeline passes and to identify possible ‘subversives’ within those communities,” Amnesty International stated.

“What is even more disturbing is that this intelligence information is then reportedly passed by OCENSA to the Colombian military who, together with their paramilitary allies, have frequently targeted those considered subversive for extrajudicial execution and ‘disappearance’.”

The human rights organization is concerned that the passing of intelligence information to the Colombian military may have contributed to subsequent human rights violations. During the last 10 years more than 30,000 people have been victims of politically motivated killings in Colombia. The vast majority of victims, who included community leaders, trades unionists, church workers and human rights defenders, were killed by the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary organizations which operate with their support or acquiescence.

It is also difficult to imagine that there could be a legitimate reason for sending OCENSA and BP employees on intelligence courses which are clearly described by the Israeli security company Silver Shadow as “psychological warfare” training. Although Amnesty International has been assured that ultimately no OCENSA/BP employees took part in such courses, it is clear from available documentation that their participation had at one stage been agreed.

Background

In recent years BP has made important progress in terms of the company’s stated commitment to protecting human rights and the environment and has made it clear that its codes of conduct extend to sub-contracted companies such as DSC. However, the activities of DSC in Colombia are undermining the credibility of BP’s commitment to the implementation of its own policies in its field operations. Through its contract with DSC in Colombia, BP runs the risk of being charged with complicity in human rights violations by virtue of association.

The role of the Colombian security forces in the implementation of a counter-insurgency strategy characterized by the systematic violation of human rights imposes a special moral obligation on national and international companies to ensure that, however unwittingly, they should not condone or encourage such actions. This is particularly the case given that in Colombia human rights violations are frequently committed to secure or protect powerful economic interests. The tragic nature of the conflict in Colombia imposes an obligation on investor companies to ensure that they publicly condemn human rights violations, vigorously promote international human rights standards and to urge the Colombian authorities to undertake appropriate steps to tackle the human rights crisis.

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