

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Colombia: The right to defend human rights**

As Colombia celebrates its national human rights day, Amnesty International today reminded the world that defending these rights is often a deadly pursuit.

The organization expressed serious concern at a recent statement made in Congress by the Minister of the Interior to the effect that the Ministry's Office for Human Rights "should not exist".

"As security concerns take increasing priority -- especially in the context of the global 'war on terrorism'-- and the Colombian authorities step up their military response to armed opposition groups, the space for human rights is being progressively eroded and those who stand up to defend them are facing growing hostility and danger," Amnesty International said.

In a public event held today in the Colombian Congress in Bogotá, the organization expressed the support of thousands of its members for the courage and dedication of the men and women who continue to carry out their vital work in defence of the rights of all Colombians under the most testing circumstances.

Amnesty International has expressed concern that some of the incoming President Álvaro Uribe's policies, proposed as a means of combating guerrilla abuses, seriously risk causing a further deterioration in human rights.

"Security quite simply does not come at the price of human rights," the organization said. "What Colombia needs are measures which strengthen rather than jeopardize fundamental rights and freedoms. It is through a renewed and unequivocal commitment to human rights -- including, crucially, the work carried out by human rights defenders, that true and lasting security will be attained and all Colombians will enjoy the peace and sense of justice that is their right."

Only in the past week, two human rights defenders were killed, in Meta department and Norte de Santander respectively. Over the past years, scores of human rights activists have been killed or "disappeared". Hundreds have suffered death threats, attacks and intimidation, or have been forced to leave the country in fear for their lives. In rural areas, where political violence is most intense, the level of persecution is such that human rights organizations are no longer able to operate.

"Defending human rights is itself a right which has been recognised by the international community, and which governments have the responsibility to uphold and protect," Amnesty International said. "Those who defend human rights seek to ensure that individual rights, rather than being mere subtleties, are valued and respected as essential components to guarantee people's

protection and security."

Amnesty International has urged President Uribe to develop a comprehensive human rights policy and plan of action as a matter of first priority.

"This Action Plan must concern itself with the plight of Colombia's human rights defenders," Amnesty International said. "They simply cannot continue to pay with their lives for simply seeking to promote the basic human rights which belong to everyone".

Amnesty International stressed that recommendations from the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders await implementation and that the Ministry of the Interior's protection program needs to be strengthened rather than undermined.

"A dialogue should be initiated, between defenders and government at the highest level, to revise and improve policies for the protection of human rights defenders in Colombia," the organization said.

**\*\* Amnesty International-Canada is sponsoring today a public event in support of Colombian human rights defenders to take place in Bogotá, Salón Boyacá del Capitolio Nacional, at 3.00 p.m. local time. During the event, Colombian human rights organizations will be presented with quilts made by Amnesty International members in Canada as a symbol of solidarity. For further information please call the Amnesty International press offices in London +44 207 413 5562 and Ottawa +1 1 613 744 76 67. Please also visit <http://www.amnesty.ca/colombia/quilt.htm>**

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