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ECUADOR: JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES FAIL TO CLARIFY HUMAN RIGHTS CRIMES

Members of the security forces in Ecuador accused of human rights violations, almost without exception, are never brought to justice, Amnesty International said today at the end of a two-week visit to the country.

"Impunity surrounding human rights cases has now become institutionalized by a judicial system that is widely regarded by lawyers and human rights defenders as seriously ineffective," the human rights organisation said.

"Those responsible for hundreds of cases of torture, enforced "disappearance" and summary execution over the past ten years continue to be protected by the judicial authorities."

In a meeting with the Attorney General, Dr Fernando Casares Carrera, Amnesty International's delegate was informed that the problem of impunity in Ecuador is symbolized by the well-known case of a teacher, Consuelo Benavides. According to a state prosecutor, he was detained, tortured and killed by members of the Ecuadorean navy in December 1985.

Dr Fernando Casares -- who has urged the Supreme Court of Justice to open trial proceedings -- told Amnesty International that he fears those responsible may never be brought to trial. Should the trial not open by next December, the case will be closed. In Ecuadorean law, trial proceedings cannot be opened ten years after the commission of the crime.

He added that such an outcome would have "grave consequences" since it would "reinforce the sense of impunity". Amnesty International regards the Benavides case as a test case which could serve as a signal by the Ecuadorean authorities to break the vicious circle of impunity.

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