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### **Next High Commissioner for Human Rights must confront human rights abusers**

Following the reported resignation of the first ever United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ambassador José Ayala-Lasso, Amnesty International is calling on the UN Secretary-General to choose a successor who will confront those responsible for gross human rights violations.

“Lessons must be drawn from the failures and successes of the past three years to make sure this crucial post is the beacon for human rights action in the world,” Amnesty International said today.

The record of the first High Commissioner has been disappointingly mixed. He presided over a potentially dynamic expansion of human rights field operations, yet he consistently failed to confront governments that were responsible for gross violations of human rights.

The organization stressed that the person who next fills the post must be seen to be a leader, a champion of human rights, someone who is widely recognized to have a breadth of practical human rights experience. The successor must be clearly independent from vested political interests.

Amnesty International members throughout the world campaigned for the creation of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights for over thirty years, most recently at the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights. Since he started work in April 1994 the organization has both criticised and worked with the first High Commissioner, to help end and prevent human rights violations in the world.

“The new High Commissioner will shape the next century’s human rights agenda, and must therefore be someone with a clear vision of the future direction for all human rights -- civil, cultural, economic, political and social -- and the skill to mobilize world leaders and the UN, to see it through,” the organization said.

“The fast changing human rights landscape demands a person who is both creative and decisive, who can defend the advances of the past 50 years and tackle attacks head on, particularly on the universality and indivisibility of human rights.”

While quiet diplomacy may at times be necessary in discussing sensitive human rights issues, dialogue is not an end itself and must lead to change. The new High Commissioner must be prepared to challenge governments who procrastinate or obstruct human rights action.

“Ultimately, the High Commissioner must be ready to publicly confront those who are responsible for gross human rights violations,” Amnesty International urged.

The new High Commissioner will need not only the support of governments but also of civil society, and the successor should therefore be open to harnessing the energies of non-governmental organizations around the world.

During his three years in the post, Ambassador Ayala-Lasso has established field operations around the world, with those in Colombia, Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire at a particularly critical stage. “We urge the UN Secretary-General to ensure that these operations receive the support and guidance they need,” Amnesty International said. “Human rights leadership is needed in the Great Lakes region more than ever if those at risk of human rights violations are not to suffer even more.”

During an uncertain transition to a new High Commissioner the UN Secretary-General should also ensure that the momentum of the restructuring of the UN Centre for Human Rights is not lost.

While the UN has not yet officially announced his resignation, it is understood that Ambassador Ayala-Lasso has resigned and will step down in a matter of weeks. The next High Commissioner will be appointed by the UN Secretary-General and approved by the UN General Assembly at a time still to be announced.

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