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Suriname amnesty law threatens President's trial for human rights violations

Suriname's parliament must reject a proposed amnesty law that would allow the country's president to escape investigation for past gross human rights violations, Amnesty International said today.

The long-delayed trial of President Dési Bouterse, who is accused of abducting and killing opponents in December 1982 while he was military leader, could be scrapped if the amnesty law is passed. The proposal will be debated in parliament today.

Bouterse was elected president in 2010 but is accused of human rights violations committed during his two previous stints in power, between 1980 and 1991.

The law proposed by Bouterse's coalition government provides impunity for offences committed "in the context of defence of the state" during the period of Bouterse's former rule.

"This is a flagrant attempt by President Bouterse to evade investigation for human rights abuses committed during his rule and deny justice to his victims and their families," said Javier Zuñiga, Special Advisor at Amnesty International.

"This proposed law contravenes international law, which states that amnesties can not be applied to those responsible for gross human rights violations including extrajudicial executions."

Members of Bouterse's Mega Combination coalition party introduced the legislation on Monday and said it would pass through parliament by the end of the week.

Amnesty International says it must be scrapped, or amended so that crimes under international law and human rights violations are not included.

"Crimes under international law must not be subjected to amnesties. And pre-trial amnesty laws for human rights violations amount to unacceptable self-amnesties," said Javier Zuñiga.

"Suriname is obliged to investigate such crimes and prosecute those suspected of criminal responsibility."

Legal proceedings against Bouterse and 24 of his associates began in November 2007 but have faced repeated delays.

The defendants are accused of the extrajudicial executions of 15 opponents of the military regime in December 1982. Reports received by Amnesty International at the time indicated that the victims were shot after being tortured.

Bouterse has denied charges that he presided over the killings but his account was contradicted by the

sole survivor of the incident, trade unionist Fred Derby, who died in May 2001.

Bouterse first came to power in 1980 when he led a coup. He allowed the return of civilian rule in 1987 but launched a second coup in 1990 - taking power for a further year.

A Dutch court convicted him in 1999 of trafficking cocaine from Suriname to the Netherlands, but he has avoided a prison sentence because he can not be extradited under Surinamese law.