

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Colombia: Authorities must ensure safety of judge in key human rights case**

Amnesty International today expressed its concern over the safety of Judge María Cristina Trejos Salazar after President Juan Manuel Santos appeared to question the validity of her decision to convict a retired army general for serious human rights violations.

On 28 April, the judge sentenced retired general Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales to 35 years in prison for his role in the enforced disappearance of 11 people in November 1985, when military forces stormed the Palace of Justice in Bogotá where members of the M-19 guerrilla group were holding those inside hostage. Over 100 people died as a result of the siege and the military operation.

Following the verdict, on 30 April President Santos reportedly said that there was no proof that retired general Cabrales had “any direct relationship with the alleged crimes committed during the taking of the Palace of Justice” and that the conviction was not “healthy for the country”.

In June 2010, another judge sentenced retired colonel Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega to 30 years in prison for his role in the same crime. Both convictions are under appeal.

The judge who convicted retired colonel Plazas Vega was repeatedly threatened during the trial and was forced to leave the country in fear of her life. Lawyers representing some of the victims in the Palace of Justice case have also been repeatedly threatened.

“The government must desist from making any further comments which call into question this latest ruling and, more generally, the independence of the judiciary. Such comments might not only undermine ongoing investigations into other senior army officers implicated in the Palace of Justice disappearances but could give a green light to those who may wish to harm Judge María Cristina Trejos,” said Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International’s Colombia researcher.

Judges, lawyers, witnesses, prosecutors, victims and human rights defenders participating in human rights-related criminal investigations have often been the target of threats and killings. Such attacks are one of the fundamental pillars of Colombia’s astronomical impunity rates.

“Given the heightened level of risk which Judge María Cristina Trejos now faces following her groundbreaking ruling against retired general Cabrales, the government must also ensure that effective protection measures, as agreed with her, are implemented,” said Marcelo Pollack.

Judge Trejos is also investigating retired general Iván Ramírez Quintero and retired colonel Edilberto Sánchez Rubian for their alleged responsibility in the enforced disappearances.

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