

AI Index: PRE 01/189/2010
09 June 2010

Senior army officer convicted over Colombia disappearances

Amnesty International called on the Colombian authorities to ensure justice for all victims of a 1985 hostage situation at the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, which left over 100 people dead, following today's landmark sentencing of a senior army officer for human rights violations.

“With this groundbreaking ruling the victims’ families, who for almost a quarter of a century have campaigned for justice, have begun to break the silence that has for so long protected those responsible,” said Marcelo Pollack, Colombia researcher at Amnesty International.

Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega faces 30 years in prison for the disappearance of 11 people in November 1985, when military forces stormed the headquarters of the judiciary where members of the 19th April Movement guerrilla group were holding those inside hostage.

“The Colombian authorities tried to bury the truth about the Palace of Justice despite overwhelming evidence that members of the security forces orchestrated the enforced disappearance, torture and execution of some of those inside,” said Marcelo Pollack.

“While there has been progress in several high profile criminal investigations into human rights violations committed by the security forces, these have largely been the result of intense international pressure,” said Marcelo Pollack.

“The majority of victims of abuses committed during the Palace of Justice siege, either by the security forces or the guerrilla, have yet to see justice.”

The Constitutional Court ruled in 1997 that human rights violations implicating members of the security force should be investigated by the civilian justice system.

Despite this ruling, military courts continue to seek jurisdiction over key cases where members of the security forces are implicated, while routinely failing to effectively investigate serious human rights violations committed by security officials.

“The investigation into Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega was repeatedly delayed because of efforts by the military justice system to claim jurisdiction over the case,” said Marcelo Pollack.

“These attempts only serve to sustain a culture of impunity, denying justice for the victims,” said Marcelo Pollack.

Those involved in the investigation and the trial, including the judge presiding over the case and a lawyer representing the victims, have repeatedly received death threats.

An appeal will follow today's verdict while investigations are underway into retired army generals Iván Ramírez Quintero and Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales; and former army colonel Edilberto Sánchez Rubian, for their alleged responsibility in the 11 Palace of Justice disappearances.