

21 February 2002

AI Index AMR 23/023/2002 - News Service Nr. 32

Colombia: As human rights emergency looms, action must be taken to protect civilians

As the army prepares to move into the demilitarized zone in the south of Colombia and the Colombian air force has started bombing targets in this area, after the collapse of peace negotiations between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Amnesty International reiterated its call for decisive action to protect the civilian population in this and other conflict areas.

The organization condemned Wednesday's hijacking of a commercial aircraft and the kidnapping of Senator Jorge Gechen Turbay which sparked the presidential decision to regain control of the demilitarized zone. If confirmed that FARC forces were responsible, this would represent a serious breach of international humanitarian law.

"The Colombian President publicly called on the armed forces to guarantee the safety of the civilian population during military operations to retake the demilitarized zone," Amnesty International noted. "However, there are fears that the necessary steps have not been taken to ensure their safety as army-backed paramilitary forces have been allowed to consolidate their presence around the demilitarized zone over the last couple of years and have threatened to move in behind the army to eliminate suspected FARC sympathisers within the civilian population."

"The strong paramilitary presence around the demilitarised zone, together with reports of a death list of at least 30 people living in the area are extremely alarming," Amnesty International added, calling for an investigation into these reports.

In the past, those accused of being "guerrilla collaborators" by the security forces and their paramilitary allies have often been targets of serious human rights violations. The civilian population of the demilitarized zone have frequently been stigmatized in this way.

"It is imperative that all necessary measures -- including action to confront and dismantle paramilitary forces -- are taken to protect civilians in the demilitarized area from reprisals at the hands of the Colombian army and its paramilitary allies," Amnesty International added, expressing further concern for the thousands of people who may flee the area in fear as the military retake control.

"A crucial step to guarantee the safety of civilians in the area would be granting access to international and national human rights organizations," the organization said, renewing its call for independent human rights monitoring in the demilitarized area. "The international community has a vital role to play at this time: to closely monitor the armed forces' efforts to comply with President Pastrana's call for civilian lives to be respected, to follow up on the government's own efforts in this respect and to insist on the full implementation of UN recommendations."

Amnesty International is also urging the FARC to respect the right to life and physical integrity of the civilian hostages and members of the armed forces and police held captive in the demilitarized area and to fully commit to respect international humanitarian law. The organization is also calling on armed opposition groups to refrain from further kidnappings, indiscriminate attacks which affect the civilian population and arbitrary and deliberate killings of those they accuse of siding with their enemies.

Once again, the organization reiterated the urgency of both sides reaching a humanitarian accord to guarantee that civilians are protected from the effects of the conflict.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>