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### **Round table with presidential candidates, Bogotá, Colombia, 6 May 2002 Opening remarks by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International**

Good evening. I would like to start by asking you to observe a minute's silence in remembrance of the civilians killed in Bojayá, Chocó department, and of all victims of the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Colombia.

Thank-you for accepting Amnesty International's invitation to take part in this debate on human rights in Colombia. In particular, I would like to thank the presidential candidates for agreeing to engage with us in a dialogue on the crucial issue that affects Colombia today; how to guarantee security without sacrificing human rights. Before we proceed with the debate, I would like to stress that one of our invited participants, Ingrid Betancourt, is prevented from being here today. She has been detained by the FARC for 3 months. Like so many other Colombians -- politicians, trade unionists, human rights defenders, journalists -- Ingrid is paying a high price for her commitment to civil society. Like all the civilian hostages currently held by armed groups, she must be released immediately.

Colombia is at a crossroads. The country is living through one of the most critical periods in its recent history. After the collapse of the peace process with the FARC last February, the conflict is intensifying, security is eroded, the human rights crisis throughout the country is deepening. You are all familiar with the statistics: about 20 people die in this conflict every day; more than 60.000 since 1985 -- around 80% of the victims are civilians, killed outside combat. Thousands of other civilians live in fear of being kidnapped, killed or "disappeared"; hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee their homes, their lands, their livelihood, as warring factions refuse to guarantee their safety and their right not to be drawn into the conflict. Paramilitary groups continue to kill, threaten, harass and displace people. Their action is unhindered at best, supported at worst by the very armed forces that are supposed to protect the public. The practices of guerrilla organizations have led to widespread violations of international humanitarian law. Proposed anti-terrorism legislation and plans to scrap human rights conditions and restrictions on the use of foreign military aid threaten to

endanger even further the lives and human rights of civilians in conflict areas.

Yet, deep as the crisis is, it is not beyond hope. The upcoming presidential elections offer a unique opportunity for change -- an opportunity to take the courageous action this country has awaited for so long: action to end impunity for human rights violations; action to confront, isolate and dismantle the paramilitary groups responsible for so many of these violations; action to protect those who are engaged in the defence of human rights, and those who are most at risk, including indigenous, internally displaced - particularly women and children - and Afro-Colombian communities. And, most urgently, action to reach an immediate humanitarian agreement with armed opposition groups to remove the civilian population from the conflict.

There is also a window of opportunity for the international community to encourage the incoming Colombian government to respect and implement the recommendations repeatedly made by the United Nations and other international bodies to address the human rights and humanitarian crisis. Governments should provide military aid only on clear conditions, and on clear proof that the security forces are tackling impunity, combatting and dismantling paramilitary groups and upholding human rights and international humanitarian law. Otherwise, military aid -- far from strengthening security - will only exacerbate the human rights crisis and send a dangerous message that human rights violations can continue with impunity.

Government after government in Colombia has failed to take effective action, which has been identified as crucial to resolve the crisis and repeatedly recommended by the United Nations, by a wide range of human rights organizations, including Amnesty International.

Government after government has failed to acknowledge that the authorities have a special duty to uphold and protect human rights, and that this duty can never be abrogated from, not even in times of extreme difficulty, threat or war.

Government after government has denied the existence of links between paramilitary groups and the security forces, even in the face of well documented evidence by a variety of bodies including the United Nations, the Inter-American system, the Office of the Attorney general and national and international NGOs including Amnesty International.

Government after government, has used the argument of security to justify its inaction. Indeed, Colombia is not alone in this. Governments the world over are maintaining -- and increasingly so since the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001 -- that security is an absolute value to be protected at all cost, even at the cost of sacrificing the human rights inherent in all of us. This is a dangerous argument. The dichotomy between security and human rights is a false one. The question we need to ask is "whose security should the government uphold?" Security is about protecting all people from harm, and this is also what international human rights standards are about. Basic human rights, such as the right to life, are just another way of describing the idea of

security that people expect their governments to ensure. Human rights are not an obstacle to security, peace or prosperity. On the contrary, they are the key to achieve these goals. Real security comes only if human rights and the rule of law are upheld without discrimination. Human rights are the basis for creating strong and accountable states, without which there can be no stability, nor security, nor peace.

The Colombian Constitutional Court has recently taken a very important step towards recognizing that human rights cannot be sacrificed to security considerations, when it ruled unconstitutional the National Security Law which granted special powers to the military and could have resulted in the violation of the most basic rights of civilians in conflict zones. Amnesty International hopes that the spirit of this ruling will be translated into concrete action to guarantee full respect for the human rights of all Colombians.

In a few months, one of the people sitting at this table with me tonight will take office as President of the Republic. I hope that our debate will contribute to inject human rights issues as a priority into the political agenda of all candidates, and that whoever wins the elections in two weeks' time will have the courage and the political vision to take up the challenge of human rights. It is a difficult challenge, but one that can and must be won. In order to face this challenge, Colombia needs a government with political will, courage and commitment. A government that won't shy away from its human rights responsibilities. Central to this is -- it is worth repeating it -- combatting the widespread impunity sheltering those responsible for human rights violations; taking action against paramilitary groups and severing their links with the armed forces; and protecting all civilians from violations at the hands of all warring parties. Once again, I thank you all for being here tonight and hand over to our moderator .

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