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## **Colombia: Human rights in mortal danger**

Systematic, widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law are endangering the very fabric of Colombian society, Amnesty International said today, marking Colombia's national human rights day.

"Against the backdrop of an increasingly brutal armed conflict, violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have reached appalling levels," Amnesty International said. "All parties to the conflict are wilfully refusing to recognise the distinction between civilian and military targets."

Over 1,000 civilians were killed in the first eight months of 1999 -- the vast majority were murdered by army-backed paramilitary organizations. Others were killed during aerial bombardments by the Colombian armed forces or were selectively targeted for elimination because of their political beliefs.

Left-wing armed opposition groups have been responsible for the deliberate and arbitrary killings of scores of civilians and the kidnapping of several hundred people not involved in the conflict.

The human rights organization fears that the already alarming levels of human rights abuses could escalate further. Peace talks currently remain stalled and parties opposed to a negotiated settlement of the 40-year-old conflict are attempting to sabotage the process by increasing their attacks on individuals and organizations engaged in the search for peace and protection of human rights.

Jaime Garzón, a renowned satirist and peace activist, was murdered on 13 August. Death lists containing the names of other prominent peace activists and human rights defenders have been publicly circulated. The human rights organization, *Instituto Popular de Capacitación*, Popular Training Institute, in Medellín was the target of a bomb attack on 29 August.

"The government must take swift and decisive action to prevent further attacks against those working for peace and ensure that the perpetrators of human rights abuses are brought to justice," the human rights organization urged.

"Breaking the climate of pervasive impunity is crucial if trust is to be established between the parties to the conflict."

Amnesty International is encouraged by recent steps taken by the government to suspend and dismiss from active service several high-ranking armed forces' officers against whom there is credible evidence of involvement in human rights violations or of collusion or tolerance of illegal paramilitary activity.

“This is an important first step in introducing a culture of accountability within the armed forces. However, much more needs to be done to ensure that all state agents respect the rule of law and fundamental human rights.”

"The government should act to ensure that all those within the army and the security forces who are implicated in human rights violations, or who are suspected of promoting, supporting or tolerating paramilitary activity, are immediately suspended pending the outcome of investigations," the organization added.

The human rights organization also urges the authorities to enforce numerous outstanding arrest warrants against paramilitary leaders and others accused of human rights abuses.

"Unless all parties to the conflict take immediate action to prevent any further escalation in the level of human rights abuses, Colombia risks becoming embroiled in a human rights and humanitarian catastrophe."

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