

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Colombia: The authorities must protect the 6 March protest marches

On 6 March the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes (Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado, MOVICE) will take to the streets once again to call for truth, justice and reparation for the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia.

The focus of these protests will be a special appeal for the implementation of an effective and comprehensive process for the restitution and restoration of lands violently seized by all parties to the conflict – the paramilitaries, the security forces and guerrilla groups.

The work and activities of MOVICE members have been crucial in making progress towards securing justice in several cases of serious human rights violations. These demonstrations are another effort in pursuit of that goal.

Amnesty International fears that, in the current human rights context and given the threats and killings that occurred during previous demonstrations, there could be a new wave of attacks against members of MOVICE and protesters. We are, therefore, calling on both the national government and departmental governments in the places where the protest marches will be held, to take all necessary measures to protect and ensure the safety of participants and protest leaders before, during and after the marches, especially in Meta and Córdoba, the departments on which MOVICE is focusing its efforts this year.

In 2008, for example, several trade unionists and human rights defenders, some of whom had actively participated in the organization of demonstrations or belonged to organizations that had participated in them, were murdered or threatened just before or shortly after 6 March.

In addition, government officials made public statements calling into question the legitimacy of the MOVICE protest action and of MOVICE itself, putting people at even greater risk. Amnesty International is therefore calling on the national and departmental governments to publicly and explicitly acknowledge the legitimacy and importance of the March protests.

The protest is taking place against a background of threats and killings targeting human rights defenders and community leaders in Colombia. In 2011, Amnesty International received reports of the killing of more than 45 human rights defenders and community leaders, several in connection with land restitution. They included Eder Verbel Rocha, who was killed by two paramilitaries in the municipality of San Onofre, Sucre Department, on 23 March 2011. In January 2012, relatives who had survived the attack received renewed death threats.

The spate of attacks on defenders calling for the return of land has taken place in the context of the adoption and implementation of the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Ley de Víctimas y de Restitución de Tierras). If properly implemented, this law could be an important step forward in efforts to restore to their rightful owners some of the millions of hectares of land that were illegally appropriated. There is no doubt that this law has helped the efforts of people who lost land. However, despite its weaknesses and contradictions, the law has provoked anger, and often violence, on the part of those who were behind the theft of land.

On 21 February, several members of MOVICE in Nariño Department received death threats by email. In the message, the “Anti-Restitution Group of Nariño” (*Grupo Anti Restitución de Nariño, GAR*) warned: “Our hands will not tremble when we execute, as we have already done on other occasions, all those

who dare to promote activities of an ideological or political nature that are focused on issues relating to land restitution and the rights of the alleged victims”.

Such threats must be investigated promptly and effectively. These new threats further underscore the urgent need for the authorities to take specific steps to ensure the safety and protection of MOVICE leaders and members and those who participate in the 6 March protest.

The national and departmental governments must take the lead in fulfilling the Colombian state's responsibility to protect MOVICE members, those participating in this protest and their leaders.

These peaceful protest marches are a legitimate activity protected by the Constitution and national norms. International human rights instruments also recognize and protect the right to freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement and the right to defend human rights.

National and local officials have a duty to act in accordance with these standards by providing whatever security guarantees may be necessary before, during and after the protest marches. Amnesty International has written to the Minister of the Interior and the Governors of Córdoba and Meta requesting information about the measures that are being taken in this regard and asking them to publicly and explicitly acknowledge the legitimacy and importance of these protest marches.

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