

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Colombia: Allegations of excessive use of force

Amnesty International is concerned that the security forces may have used disproportionate and excessive force on 16 May 2006 against indigenous, peasant-farmer and afro-descendent people during a demonstration on the Panamerican Highway, in several areas of Cauca department.

On the morning of 16 May, at least 15,000 people reportedly occupied the Panamerican Highway around the area of La María, in the municipality of Piendamó, in the department of Cauca. Allegedly, they gathered to protest against economic and agrarian policies, as well as other policies which might have an impact on human rights, such as the protection of impunity in many human rights abuses cases.

In clearing the highway of demonstrators, the security forces reportedly shot at and used tear gas on demonstrators, and allegedly three army helicopters also took part in this action. Demonstrators are said to have thrown stones at security forces.

Amnesty International is concerned that at least one person was reportedly killed, Pedro Coscué, a member of an indigenous community living in the area, apparently by gunshots.

According to information received, at least 50 people were injured during the action, including several members of the security forces and a twelve-year-old child.

Of the injured, at least three people have suffered fire-arm wounds after reportedly being shot at by security forces, in the area of El Pital, in the municipality of Caldono. Amnesty International is seriously concerned that ambulances and medical staff are alleged to have been prevented from entering the area to treat these three people for at least several hours. There are also reports which indicate that there are several people are missing.

There are reports that at least three members of the security forces were being held, allegedly by demonstrators. At the moment, Amnesty International does not have information as to whether they are still being held. The organization recognizes that the security forces have a duty to guarantee the safety of their colleagues, but is concerned that excessive use of force may be used to secure the release of these three members of the security forces.

Amnesty International calls on the Colombian authorities to immediately investigate the circumstances surrounding the killing and those demonstrators who are missing. Also, Amnesty International urges the authorities to ensure that the security forces refrain from excessive and disproportionate force in responding to the demonstrations. The organization is aware that reports indicate that several members of the security forces were injured on 16 May, but is concerned that these injuries should not be used as an excuse to ignore international standards on the use of force by the security forces in line with UN Code of

Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials.

Amnesty International also calls on the community leaders to ensure that the three members of the security forces who were being held are released immediately and unharmed, unless they have already been released.

Background Information

On 16 May 2006, there were demonstrations held in at least 14 departments throughout the country, as part of the National Itinerant Summit of Social Organizations (Cumbre Nacional Itinerante de Organizaciones Sociales). Social and human rights activists, indigenous, peasant, trade unionists, afro-descendent, and political opposition groups participated in these demonstrations.

According to press reports, the governor of Cauca has stated that the demonstrations are organized and supported by guerrilla forces. In the past, those accused of collaborating with the guerrilla forces have been the victim of serious human rights violations committed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies. Members of the National Indigenous Organization (ONIC) have stated that this is not true. These accusation raise serious concern for the safety of the demonstration organizers.