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Colombia: Violence Against Women -- Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes

The commander of the paramilitaries raped me. (...) You have to keep quiet ... If you talk, people say you were asking for it ... I came to Medellin.... When the army comes, I start thinking that it's going to happen to me all over again. Like a nightmare that never ends ... , Testimony given to Amnesty International.

(Bogotá) By sowing terror and exploiting women for military gain, the security forces, army-backed paramilitaries and the guerrilla have turned the bodies of thousands of women and girls into a battleground, said Susan Lee, Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme today as it launched a new report on Violence against Women in Colombia.

The report brings together the testimonies of women who have survived sexual violence at the hands of the various armed actors and whose voices have rarely been heard. The stigma of sexual violence, and the fear that surrounds it, has prevented many women from speaking out.

"With this report we hope to give a voice to the thousands of women survivors whose experiences of sexual violence remain hidden behind a wall of silence fuelled by discrimination and impunity," said Ms Lee.

Sexual violence against women, including rape, forms an integral part of Colombia's 40-year-old armed conflict and the evidence uncovered by Amnesty International suggests that it is widespread.

Rape and other sexual crimes, such as genital mutilation, are frequently carried out by the security forces and the paramilitaries as part of their terror tactics against communities they accuse of collaborating with guerrilla groups. Afro-descendent, indigenous and peasant women, shantytown dwellers, and the internally displaced are at particular risk.

"Women and girls are raped, sexually abused and even killed because they behave in ways deemed as unacceptable to the combatants, or because women may have challenged the authority of armed groups, or simply because women are viewed as a useful target on which to inflict humiliation on the enemy", said Ms Lee.

Women have been sexually abused after being kidnapped by guerrilla groups and paramilitaries or while being detained by the security forces. Guerrilla groups have also forced their female combatants to

have abortions and use contraception.

"Paramilitary and guerrilla groups seek to intrude into even the most intimate aspects of women's lives in areas under their control by setting curfews and dress codes, and by humiliating, flogging, raping and even killing those who dare to transgress," said Ms Lee.

Because of culturally-entrenched gender stereotyping, guerrilla and paramilitary groups have also violently targeted groups they deem to be socially "undesirable", such as sex workers, lesbians and gay men, and those suspected of carrying HIV/AIDS.

The Colombian authorities, and the general public, have for too long ignored the scandal of sexual violence, viewing it as a "private problem". Cases are rarely recorded in official statistics or in autopsy reports, and are even more invisible if they are related to the armed conflict.

The state has been unwilling to bring those responsible to justice. When a case is investigated, the treatment of victims by the authorities is often degrading and the perpetrators are very rarely identified, and even less so punished. Medical treatment for survivors is almost non-existent for those who cannot afford it.

"Women survivors of sexual violence are punished again and again. Not only have they been sexually abused but they are often rejected by their family, humiliated by the legal system, refused medical care, and rarely see their attacker brought to justice", said Ms Lee.

Many women's organizations in Colombia have sought to fill the gap by providing medical assistance and advice to women survivors. Many of these organizations find themselves the target of the armed actors because their work is seen as helping the "enemy".

The Colombian government has a responsibility to prevent and punish violence against women. Despite repeated recommendations by the United Nations and other international bodies, there is little evidence to suggest that the government has taken sufficient measures to end such abuses and bring perpetrators to justice, whoever they may be.

Government policies continue to drag civilians further into the conflict and to exacerbate the scandal of impunity.

"This impunity is the cornerstone of the ongoing human rights crisis in Colombia. The Colombian state is failing in its duty to exercise due diligence to prevent, punish and eradicate sexual and gender violence and is sending out a message that such behaviour is tolerated or even condoned," said Ms Lee.

"All sides in the conflict must publicly denounce gender-based violence and issue clear instructions to their forces that violence against women will not be tolerated and that those responsible will be held accountable and brought to justice," concluded Ms Lee.

Background Information

Amnesty International visited Colombia in 2003 and 2004 to carry out research into sexual violence against women in several areas of the country. During the visits, Amnesty International conducted direct interviews with survivors, witnesses, activists and organizations working on cases of sexual violence and those which provide assistance to victims. This report is based on first-hand accounts by survivors.

This report is part of the organization's International Campaign to Stop Violence against Women, launched in March 2004.

For a full copy of the report: "Colombia: Scarred bodies, hidden crimes, sexual violence against women in the armed conflict," please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR230402004>

For media materials, please see: <http://news.amnesty.org>

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