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Venezuela: Authorities must ensure that human rights violations committed by security forces are investigated and punished

In light of recent information on another possible case of arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances and the execution of 12 young people allegedly committed in the context of the so-called Operation Liberation and Protection of the People (OLP), Amnesty International urges the Venezuelan authorities to comply with their obligation to guarantee justice, truth and reparation, including a guarantee of non-recurrence, for the relatives of victims of crimes under international law and grave human rights violations.

On 15 October 2016, Elizer Ramírez, Antony Vargas, Antonio Aladejo, Luis Sanz, Dennys Acevedo, Oscar Rodríguez, Yorman Mejías, Freddy Hernández, Víctor Manuel Martínez, Jairo Rivas, Kenry González and Carlos Marchena were arbitrarily detained in the region of Barlovento, in the state of Miranda, 30km to the east of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. Over a month later, on 28 November 2016, their bodies were found in two mass graves. According to testimonies collected by Amnesty International, the whereabouts of other possible victims linked to the same incident are still unknown.

The so-called OLP has been reported by civil society organizations and individual cases of orders of arbitrary detentions, torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment such as forced disappearances and executions carried out by officials who should be responsible for ensuring compliance with the law are all crimes under international law and constitute grave human rights violations. The events in Barlovento are further proof of the increase in crimes under international law and human rights violations which have been committed in the context of these operations since they began over a year ago.

Amnesty International has learned of cases of grave violations of human rights since the implementation of Operation Liberation and Protection of the People in July 2015. According to the Ministry of Justice, within the first month of the operation, 52 civilians had died in clashes with security forces.

Impunity for crimes under international law and human rights violations has increased in Venezuela. According to figures from the Attorney General's office, only 3 per cent of complaints in relation to such crimes and violations resulted in the culprits facing criminal charges.

Amnesty International acknowledges the authorities' willingness to condemn the events and take action after the bodies of the 12 disappeared young people were found, shown through declarations and public statements from the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Defence, and hopes that such statements translate into concrete action both for the punishment of those responsible, with strict adherence to due process, and in terms of reparation and protection for the relatives of the victims and witnesses to the events.

However, punishing these crimes and violations does not mean that the Venezuelan government is exempt from its responsibility for instigating unacceptable plans which, although the intended purpose was to reduce the alarming rates of violence in the country, ended up leading to even more human rights violations.

Amnesty International believes that the use of OLP operations must cease immediately and plans for comprehensive citizen safety must be developed which respect human rights, with the broad and diverse

participation of civil society and the guidance of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the framework of the National Human Rights Plan approved in March of this year.