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COLOMBIA: THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS CLOSES WITH
A CALL TO THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES TO ADOPT A DECLARATION.

The international conference on the protection of human rights defenders, called by Amnesty International, was brought to a close last weekend in Bogota, with an appeal to the Organization of American States to adopt a Declaration on the right to defend human rights.

The conference defined this right as a set of rights, already recognized at an international level, which every individual must be able to exercise openly when combatting human rights violations perpetrated against others.

The final declaration of this meeting also calls on the States in the region and on the regional and international organizations to adopt effective protection mechanisms for these people. This protection must be extended to all those involved in cases of human rights violations: informers, witnesses and court officials. The document calls on the United Nations to finalize and approve the draft declaration on this theme which it has now been debating for over 11 years.

The experts meeting in Bogotá, over 60 from different backgrounds, including members of the Catholic church, members of NGOs and the Honduran ombudsman, made it clear that the conditions for defending human rights were not adequate in many parts of the region, despite the political transition and economic and social transformation.

According to the declaration everybody has the right to passively or actively oppose all human rights violations, to report them when they occur and to support the victims of such violations.

“This principle is particularly relevant in a region in which those who dare to report or criticize abuses, or to support the more vulnerable sectors of the population, frequently suffer persecution and the loss of their own rights and freedom,” affirmed Pierre Sané Secretary General of Amnesty International.

The experts also stressed the legitimacy of those who work against all forms of impunity for human rights violators, and in particular against the amnesty laws which feed the cycle of violence and work against democratic coexistence.

The practical aims of the conference were satisfactorily met. Thus a package of measures was agreed aimed at improving the security of human rights defenders, such as the maintenance of permanent contact with the diplomatic body, and the starting up of a permanent process of consultation between human rights defenders in the region, which will serve to strengthen the position of every one of them in their respective countries.

At the same time it was agreed to request some governments to formalize preferential treatment, with regards to visas, extended stays and work permits for those human rights defenders who feel under pressure to leave their country of origin.

The recommendations for the agreed actions include more than a hundred proposals. Among these is the possibility of including a conditional clause in agreements on economic aid given to developing countries, as well as a request that head of state summits in the region introduce a human rights agenda.

Other relevant proposals were to ask the Inter American Court on Human Rights to include a chapter on human rights defenders in their annual report; to include state organizations, such as the public prosecution and the Attorney General's office in the protection of witnesses, informers and journalists; and to ask the human rights commissions of the legislative bodies to provide a consultancy service for NGOs working in the field.

ENDS/