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Bolivia: Chapare - Human rights cannot be eradicated along with the coca leaf

Given the massive increase in the presence of the military in El Chapare, Amnesty International today called on the Bolivian authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure that any action relating to the maintenance of law and order in the region does not lead to further bloodshed and violations of human rights.

“The demonstrations planned over the next few weeks by coca-leaf producers in El Chapare must not be marked, as they have been so far, by excessive use of force on the part of the security forces,” the organization added, pointing out that since 1994 over 30 peasants have reportedly died and hundreds been injured in clashes with security forces in the area.

“It is time to break the pattern of human rights violations that has characterized the way in which the agreements with the United States on the eradication of coca leaf crops have been implemented,” Amnesty International continued, while stressing that “in ensuring that the agreements are implemented, the Bolivian authorities cannot disregard the articles of either their own constitution or those of international conventions to which Bolivia is a party in which fundamental human rights are enshrined.”

In a letter sent yesterday to the Bolivian Interior Minister, Amnesty International expressed its deep concern at the killing of two people and the wounding of at least four by the Joint Task Force over the last few weeks in the context of demonstrations against the eradication program.

The organization also urged the Bolivian authorities to launch an independent investigation by the civilian courts in order to determine whether the army and the police acted in accordance with international standards which set strict limits on the use of force by law enforcement officials.

Information received by the organization seems to indicate that the response of the Joint Task Force to actions taken by the peasants to prevent eradication has been characterized by excessive use of force.

“To avoid further violations of fundamental human rights, it is essential for the Bolivian Government to ensure that members of the Joint Task Force and army and police reinforcements entering the El Chapare area have received proper training so that they abide by the international standards relating to law enforcement functions,” Amnesty International said.

The organization ended by saying that it shared the concern expressed by institutions such as the Catholic Church, the National and Regional Ombudsman’s Offices and non-governmental human rights organizations that the increased presence of the army has led

to an intensification of the conflict in El Chapare.

“We call on the Bolivian Government to take all necessary measures to ensure that tensions in the region do not escalate as a result of militarization and lead to further human rights violations,” Amnesty International said.

General background

The force which is permissible for law enforcement officials to use is described in the *Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials* and the *United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*. These standards, among other things, state that force can only be used when strictly necessary and in proportion to the objective to be achieved or the threat that is present and that lethal force should only be used when it is unavoidable in order to protect life.

In its letter Amnesty International described the cases of two recent victims of military action in the context of the coca leaf eradication program. On 27 September 2001, after peasants from the area had surrounded the military camp at Loma Alto in El Chapare for five days, members of the Joint Task Force, made up of members of the army and police, fired at a group of journalists and peasants who were approaching the camp, resulting in the death of Ramón Pérez, a peasant. Ramón Pérez was reported to be one of the guides accompanying a group of six journalists who were trying to visit the military camp.

On 16 October during confrontations between peasants and members of the Joint Task Force in the locality of Isarzama, in order to break up a demonstration of peasants carrying stones and sticks who were trying to stop the eradication operation in the countryside around Quillacollo, members of the joint forces used firearms and teargas against the demonstrators, fatally injuring Nilda Escobar Aguilar. A teargas capsule reportedly became embedded in her forehead and she died in the local medical centre.

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