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Colombia: Civilians once more at imminent risk

If last-minute attempts to resume the Colombian peace process fail, the foreseeable escalation of the armed conflict will have a disastrous impact on the civilian population caught in the hostilities, Amnesty International said today, calling on both sides in the conflict to respect the lives and human rights of civilians.

Most at risk are the people living in the demilitarized zone, an area comprising five municipalities of the departments of Caquetá and Meta which the government had conceded to Colombia's main armed opposition group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in November 1998 as a means of facilitating peace talks. The Colombian armed forces are set to retake this area militarily on Monday, 14 January if efforts to resume peace talks this weekend fail.

"These people were not given a choice as to whether they wanted to live in FARC-controlled territory, but have been stigmatized as 'FARC collaborators' and consequently may be the victims of reprisals at the hands of the Colombian army and its paramilitary allies," Amnesty International said.

The organization called for international human rights monitoring to be established in the demilitarized zone at the earliest opportunity and urgent measures to be taken to guarantee the security of the civilian

population including by taking decisive action to confront and dismantle paramilitary forces positioned around the demilitarized zone.

"This action would be in line with repeated United Nations recommendations to confront and dismantle paramilitary groups," Amnesty International stressed.

"It is imperative that, if a military offensive is carried out to retake control of the demilitarized zone, all necessary measures are taken to protect civilians and to act against paramilitary groups which may move into the area," the organization added, expressing concern that a military offensive may result in mass displacement of civilians, who may be exposed to further human rights violations in the areas of displacement.

"The international community should renew its efforts to ensure that the Colombian government takes all necessary steps -- including dismantling army-backed paramilitary groups -- to safeguard civilians," Amnesty International added. "In particular, the US government should make sure that it closely monitors its military aid to ensure that it is not used in operations resulting in human rights violations."

Over the last year the US has supplied large quantities of military aid, including helicopters, to the Colombian armed forces supposedly to combat drugs-trafficking. However, recent statements from senior Colombian military officials suggest that the US military equipment, including helicopters, may be used in the operation to retake control of the demilitarized area and counter-insurgency operations.

Background

The Colombian peace process, ongoing since 1999, came to an end on Wednesday 9 January when the government announced the talks with

the FARC, Colombia's main armed opposition group, were over. A 48-hour deadline was announced on Thursday to allow time for the FARC to meet with the UN Secretary-General's representative in Colombia, James Lemoyne in a last attempt to resume negotiations. Should this fail, the FARC will have 48 more hours to leave the demilitarized zone ending at 9:30 p.m. on Monday, 14 January. It has been reported that large numbers of Colombian soldiers are amassing at the borders of the demilitarized zone. Over the last couple of years Amnesty International has received reports of paramilitary forces consolidating their presence in regions surrounding the demilitarized zone and establish paramilitary bases in this area. The security forces have taken no decisive action to prevent this consolidation.

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