

**TO: PRESS OFFICERS/TRANSLATORS**  
**FROM: IS PRESS OFFICE**  
**DATE: 2 MARCH 1994**

Following is the text of the Colombia news release. Please note that the embargo time will be decided tomorrow and will make it 15 March Colombia time (which will most likely be 16 March gmt). You will be informed through the News Service as soon as we know the embargo time. Please note that because of the risk of embargo breaks, we will only be faxing the news release out to media at the time of the press conference in Colombia and would like to ask you to hold back all materials until then too. A media advisory with details of the press conference in Colombia will be sent out to you before the launch and will not contain information on the substance of the campaign. This may be faxed to media the day before the embargo. I hope this is manageable for you. Best wishes, Paula Seager.

17:00 hrs gmt Wednesday 16 March 1994

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**COLOMBIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES GOVERNMENT POLICIES.**  
**SAYS REALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS MUST BE EXPOSED**

In Colombia, the army and their paramilitary protegés are committing political killings and "disappearances" on a massive scale, says Amnesty International, and successive governments have tried to hide behind a public relations smokescreen instead of taking effective steps to tackle the problem.

The human rights organization today launches an international campaign in Bogotá, aiming to expose the facts about political killings and "disappearances" in Colombia - and, crucially, to get the next government to take effective action to stop human rights violations in the future.

"There are many myths about political violence in Colombia," said Amnesty International, "myths the government uses to obscure its own responsibilities.

"There is the myth that drug-trafficking is behind the political violence -- when in fact, it accounts for only a tiny fraction -- or that the perpetrators are extremists of the left and the right locked in private feuds. The stark reality is that the vast majority of political killings are committed by the Colombian armed forces and their paramilitary protegés.

"Perhaps the greatest myth of all is that the government is doing all it can to end these killings. The truth is that successive governments have hidden behind a skillfully constructed public image, while the bureaucratic trappings that are supposed to safeguard human rights do little to protect anyone."

Meanwhile, the killings go on - 20,000 people have been killed for political reasons since 1986. And when human rights defenders try to take action, they themselves become the targets of the violence.

People working to protect human rights are frequently harassed and threatened, and increasing numbers have been killed or have "disappeared". In 1992 alone, three workers for CREDHOS, an independent human rights organization, were shot dead, and others were threatened.

Lawyers, too have been killed or threatened - when Dr Rafael Barrios Mendivil took up the case of 20 Paez Indians who were massacred by police and paramilitary forces in December 1991, he was the third lawyer to start on the case. The previous two had been shot. He, too, received threats, and eventually left Colombia. "The way we try to deal with it," he said, "is to keep constantly in mind all those who have already died and given their blood for a better future. It's a commitment from which one can't retreat. We have to go forwards."

According to Amnesty International, one of the main reasons for the continuing violence is the deadly sense of impunity which pervades the security forces - gathering strength because successive governments have not taken decisive action to make the armed

forces act within the law. Despite overwhelming evidence of the responsibility of armed forces and police personnel for continuing widespread human rights violations, those responsible have rarely been brought to justice.

Instead, those who commit violations go free - free to kill again. In October 1993, there was a massacre at El Bosque, a village in Riofrio, Cauca department, in southern Colombia. Around 25 men, some wearing combat fatigues or police uniforms, arrived early in the morning - by noon, 13 people had been dragged from their homes, tortured and murdered. Five women, including a nun, were raped and killed. Two babies and several children were orphaned.

No one has been charged with direct participation in the massacre, but an army lieutenant-colonel was discharged from the army after his role was revealed. He was already notorious for his part in another massacre in 1988, when 21 workers at a banana plantation were killed by masked men. A civilian judge ordered the arrest of the officer for directing the murders - but the army responded by promoting him, initially putting him in charge of the army's press and public relations. Had he been brought to justice the massacre at Riofrio might never have happened.

The impunity with which the security forces commit political killings has spilled over into the rest of society, with police-backed "death squads" in the cities eliminating hundreds of people they consider to be "disposable", including homeless children, homosexuals and drug addicts.

Political violence is not confined to the armed forces and their paramilitary allies - all the main guerrilla organizations have been responsible for deliberate and arbitrary killings, kidnapping and hostage-taking. In May 1993, for example, a 63-year-old Spanish parish priest, Javier Cirujano Arjona, was murdered. In a communiqué to a radio station, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) announced that they had "executed" the priest for "collaborating with paramilitary groups".

With shocking levels of political violence in Colombia and with the up-coming presidential elections offering an opportunity for change, Amnesty International believes it is time for a serious commitment to end the abuses. The organization has devised a list of recommendations for both government and guerrilla groups, aimed at ending the slaughter, including a call for the government to dismantle the army's paramilitary forces and for the creation of an independent commission of inquiry in order to ensure that perpetrators of political killings are brought to justice.

Said Amnesty International: "The Colombian government says it is tackling human rights violations. We say it is not - and until we see those who use the power of the state to kill in cold blood brought to justice, there can be little hope for an end to the violence. In the meantime, the government continues to confuse public relations exercises with effective action.

Our message is simple - more can and must be done. What is needed now is the political will to act."

**EMBARGOED FOR 17:00 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH 1994**