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## **Colombia: Action not words to keep human rights defenders alive**

*19 May 1997 -- Human rights activists Elsa Alvarado and Carlos Mario Calderón were shot dead in their flat in Bogotá by masked gunmen.*

*19 May 2000 -- Although four people have been arrested and charged with involvement in the killing and two prominent paramilitary leaders identified as having masterminded the crime, none of them has faced justice yet.*

In the past three years alone, more than 25 Colombian human rights activists have been killed, a similar number have narrowly escaped murder, and at least 40 have fled the country fearing for their life.

“These chilling statistics point to a situation in which human rights defenders continue to face alarming levels of danger and systematic intimidation campaigns,” Amnesty International said today on the release of its new report “*Colombia, Protection of human rights defenders: One step forward, three steps back*”.

“As Colombia’s violent conflict continues to escalate and all sides show blatant disregard for human rights, those who stand up for such rights are left defenceless in the face of the frequent attacks they suffer,” the organization continued.

The report acknowledges that the Colombian authorities have taken some initial steps to improve the protection of human rights organizations and their members, including offering such measures as police protection and bullet-proof jackets to individuals, installing security cameras and reinforcing the premises of organizations.

However, more incisive action is needed to tackle the ongoing harassment of human rights defenders at the hands of the armed forces and their paramilitary allies, as well as of armed opposition groups. Such action must be part of a comprehensive protection program that reflects the complexities of the problem.

“So far the authorities have confined themselves to initial measures, which merely patch up the problem, but do not deal with its root causes,” Amnesty International said.

“What is now needed is for the Colombian authorities to show the political will to implement a more effective protection strategy and to put an end to the impunity that shelters those who target human rights defenders,” the organization continued.

“As the case of Elsa and Carlos Mario -- as well as those of a number of other murdered or ‘disappeared’ human rights workers and campaigners -- clearly shows, insufficient action is taken to identify and bring to justice those responsible for such cases.”

Amnesty International is urging the Colombian authorities to address the issue of impunity and to undertake a series of measures to better protect those at the forefront of the struggle to promote and protect human rights. Such measures include:

- adopting a comprehensive program for the protection of human rights defenders, in accordance with requests of members of human rights organizations;
- supporting the legitimacy of the activities of human rights organizations, and ensuring that all public servants, including the security forces, abstain from making unsubstantiated public statements linking human rights activists to the armed opposition, which often results in them being the target of attacks;
- effectively disbanding, disarming and prosecuting paramilitary groups operating with the complicity or acquiescence of the security forces;
- ensuring that exhaustive and impartial investigations are carried out into violations against human rights defenders and that those responsible are brought to justice;
- suspending from active service armed forces personnel against whom there is credible evidence of human rights violations;
- purging the armed forces of anyone found responsible for human rights violations;
- ensuring full implementation of international recommendations and resolution regarding human rights defenders by the United Nations and Inter-American human rights system.

“At a time when the U.N. Commission on Human Rights has recognised the importance of protecting those engaged in human rights work by creating a Special Representative for human rights defenders, it is high time for the Colombian authorities to put into practice their reiterated pledges to make human rights a priority on their agenda,” Amnesty International said.

“Action not words is what is needed to keep Colombian human rights defenders alive and to allow them to carry out their vital work.”

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**To obtain a copy of the report, or to arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International press office in London on +44 20 7413 5562.**