

105/96

AI INDEX: 23/31/96

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COLOMBIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT TO TAKE URGENT MEASURES

Amnesty International yesterday called on President Ernesto Samper to adopt urgent measures to bring to an end the escalation of paramilitary and guerrilla violence in the areas of Antioquia, César, Putumayo and Sucre, and pointed out that the most frequent victims of the violence are civilians unwittingly caught up in the middle of the conflict. The organization fears a major deterioration in an already critical human rights situation within the country, as a result of a political climate which has led to a reluctance on the part of the government to intervene in the face of growing violations.

Amnesty International also expressed its deep concern to the president with regard to the attacks on human rights defenders who are working to try to improve a situation of widespread human rights violations. The organization called on the government to recognize the legitimacy and legality of non-governmental organizations and other people working in the field, such as ombudsmen, spokespersons and investigative journalists, and for the effective application of the necessary guarantees that would allow them to carry out their work.

The Amnesty International delegation reminded President Ernesto Samper of the high expectations that had been aroused by the plan announced by the government in 1994, including the dismantlement of paramilitary groups, and the subsequent surprise and frustration at the government's failure to put the plan into practice. Both paramilitary and guerrilla groups continue to extend their activities, especially in the four areas mentioned, and are the most important factor in the deterioration of the human rights situation.

Amnesty International's position regarding the impunity granted to human rights violators was also addressed. In line with the recommendations of the United Nations and the Organisation of America States, the delegation expressed to President Ernesto Samper its opposition to the fact that torture, killings and disappearances continue to fall within the jurisdiction of the military courts, instead of being transferred to civil justice. The organization believes that these crimes cannot be considered to be acts of service.

Likewise, the delegation expressed its surprise and concern at attempts to limit the role of the Attorney General's office by depriving it of its disciplinary function and transferring this exclusively to military criminal justice.

Amnesty International concluded by underlining that the present political situation must not, and cannot, divert the attention of the national government from the grave human rights situation, and particularly from the problems arising in the region of Antioquia, César, Putumayo and Sucre. The organization therefore calls on the Government of the Republic of Colombia to reaffirm the directives of its human rights program and to urgently adopt the complementary measures needed to avoid a deterioration of the situation.

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