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COLOMBIA: RESIGNATION OF COLOMBIA'S AMBASSADOR SHOULD NOT BLIND EUROPEAN UNION TO ONGOING PARAMILITARY ABUSES

The European Union -- which in a recent resolution expressed its concern about the human rights situation faced by 280 forcibly evicted families -- should not use yesterday's announcement that the Colombian ambassador has resigned from his post to gloss over continued paramilitary abuses, Amnesty International said today.

Carlos Arturo Marulanda Ramírez's departure, as Colombian ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union, follows allegations of his involvement between February and March this year in the forced evictions of 280 peasant farmers from lands in the Bellacruz Ranch which is partly owned by him.

"Marulanda's departure is no excuse to take the international spotlight off the plight of the forcibly evicted families," Amnesty International said. "We fear that with his departure international pressure to take action, and the close monitoring of the situation in Bellacruz by the European Union, will both end."

The evictions of the peasant farmers were carried out in northern Colombia by a paramilitary group operating in the ranch and neighbouring areas with the support of the Colombian armed forces after Marulanda Ramírez Ltd -- the company representing Marulanda's interests -- lost their appeal claiming part of the land occupied by the peasant farmers.

The peasant farmers' houses were burnt, and many of the families were tortured and threatened with death if they returned. Subsequently, several of the evicted peasant farmers and other people trying to help them have been killed, "disappeared" or have received death threats.

"Marulanda Ramírez's resignation does not change what took place, and is not going to end the atrocities committed by the army-backed paramilitary against the evicted peasant farmers," Amnesty International said. "The resignation should not be seen as ending the problem."

In fact, at least 13 people have been killed or 'disappeared' since the evictions took place, and 280 families remain homeless and under threat. Amnesty International is calling on the Colombian Government to ensure the safe return or relocation of those families, ensure that those responsible for the killings are brought to justice, and bring paramilitary violence in the area to an end.

At least 25 arrest warrants have been issued by the Attorney-General of Colombia against paramilitary leaders operating in the Bellacruz Ranch; however, military and police authorities have singularly failed to take action to capture them, and have allowed paramilitary groups to continue operating freely in the area.

“The Bellacruz crisis is far from over. The displaced families and those supporting them continue to face human rights violations,” Amnesty International said. “The European Union should continue to follow the case very closely and demand the immediate arrests of paramilitary leaders against whom arrest warrants have been issued.”

Amnesty International is also appealing to the European Union to insist that anyone else involved in the abuses be brought to justice, and that effective measures are taken to ensure the safety of those affected

## **BACKGROUND**

In agreements signed with the peasant farmers, the Colombian authorities pledged to guarantee the safe return or relocation of the evicted families, to dismantle the paramilitary groups operating in the ranch and to bring to justice those responsible for the abuses. The agreements have not been honoured, and the death threats, evictions and killings have continued.

In order to press the Colombian authorities to fulfil their commitments, some of the displaced families have been peacefully occupying the offices of the Colombian Agrarian Institute (INCORA) and of the Human Rights Ombudsman in Bogota since 5 August. According to reports received by Amnesty International, the less than ideal living conditions have caused illness among the children. Other families are housed in the Pelaya Peasant Farmers' House, where they face constant paramilitary threat and harassment, although they were promised constant police protection.

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