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Colombia: Kidnapped Catholic Bishop must be released immediately

Amnesty International has learned with deep concern of the kidnapping of Mgr José de Jesús Quintero Díaz, Bishop of the Diocese of Tibú in northern Colombia, and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

“The kidnapping of the Bishop constitutes an abuse of his fundamental rights and is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian principles,” Amnesty International said today.

“We urgently call on those responsible to respect the life and physical integrity of the Bishop, and for his immediate and unconditional release”.

The Bishop was kidnapped on the afternoon Sunday, 15 August, when the car in which he was travelling was intercepted by a group of armed men who reportedly identified themselves as members of the Simon Bolívar National Guerrilla Coordination, *Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar*, (CGSB).

This is the second time that Mgr Quintero has been kidnapped by armed opposition groups. In November 1997 he was abducted by guerrillas of the National Liberation Army, *Ejército Nacional de Liberación*, - who are members of the CGSB - and held for almost a month before being released unharmed.

The human rights organization repeats its call for the all parties to Colombia's escalating conflict to respect human rights and humanitarian principles.

Background

The kidnapping of Mgr Quintero takes place in the context of the worsening human rights situation in Tibú and the surrounding region of Catatumbo in north-eastern department of North Santander on Colombia's border with Venezuela.

Over 100 people, the majority civilians, have been killed in the region in the past three months and several thousand have been displaced from their homes since right-wing paramilitary forces launched an offensive in the area targeting civilian communities in areas of guerrilla influence. There is compelling evidence that the paramilitary groups have acted with the support or acquiescence of the Colombian armed forces in the region.

The widespread contempt for human rights in Colombia has led to a deep-rooted crisis of alarming proportions. More than 30,000 people have been victims of politically motivated killings in the last decade, some 3,000 have “disappeared” and nearly one a half million people have been internally displaced by the escalating and increasingly brutal armed conflict.

Principal victims of the spiralling conflict continue to be civilians, mostly peasant farmers living in areas whose control is disputed between the armed forces and their paramilitary allies, and armed opposition groups.

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