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COLOMBIA: BELLACRUZ "HOW MANY MORE PEASANTS WILL HAVE TO DIE?"

The European Union (EU) should take decisive action now to help prevent further deaths of forcibly displaced Colombian peasant farmers, Amnesty International said today as representatives of the farmers continue their visit to several European countries.

“Even in the past few days, the paramilitary have killed four peasant farmers from the Bellacruz Ranch. How many more have to die before a strong, clear message is sent to the Colombian Government that justice should be done and paramilitary activities should be brought to an end,” the organization said.

Last October, the European Parliament adopted a resolution expressing concern about the human rights situation faced by the 280 peasant farmer families forcibly evicted by a paramilitary group from lands in the Bellacruz Ranch, department of Cesar. In urging the EU to take further steps, the organization noted the EU’s ongoing program of cooperation with the Andean countries, including Colombia.

“The very nature of that cooperation places the EU in a unique position to demand stronger action on the part of the Colombian Government to protect the basic human rights of its citizens,” Amnesty International said.

“An ever increasing number of people are dying at the hands of the paramilitary who commit atrocities with almost total impunity. It is only when these perpetrators are held to account for their crimes that the Colombian Government will be sending a clear message that this will not be tolerated.”

Amnesty International welcomes yesterday’s call by Dick Spring, Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs, for respect for human rights with regards to the Bellacruz case and the organization hopes that this will secure a strong response from the European Union (EU) and its Member States (Ireland currently holds the presidency of the EU).

Amnesty International has been echoing Colombian human rights organizations in making repeated calls to the Colombian authorities to protect the lives of the nearly 2,000 individuals forcibly displaced from the ranch by illegal paramilitary forces operating with the support of the Colombian army. Nevertheless, the threats and killings by the paramilitary have continued, and the recent killings of four more peasant farmers just a few days ago raise to at least 30 the number of civilian farmers killed or "disappeared" as a result of the Bellacruz conflict.

Brothers Diosnel, Dinael and José del Carmen Toscano were killed on 5 December, in front of their young children by members of a paramilitary group who entered the house where they were hiding in Valledupar, department of Cesar. Their brother, peasant farmer leader Jesús Toscano, was killed three days earlier in Pelaya, also in the department of Cesar, after returning to his house to collect some things.

The paramilitary members responsible for killing Jesús reportedly swore they would kill the whole Toscano family, and are said to have been looking for several months for Ariel Toscano, a fifth brother, who they also intend to kill.

On 22 November, Amnesty International warned of a likely increase of human rights abuses by the paramilitary group operating in the Bellacruz Ranch and neighbouring areas, after documenting a paramilitary meeting said to have taken place on the ranch on 15 November. A death list was displayed at the meeting, and those present reportedly agreed that the Bellacruz peasant farmers would be persecuted and killed wherever they went, as a lesson for the denunciations brought by them at national and international level.

“The brutal killing of four members of the Toscano families -- and the very real threat faced by others -- are clear indications that the fears expressed were well founded, and that lack of action on the part of the Colombian authorities is costing more and more lives every day,” Amnesty International said.

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