

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 23/073/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 123
17 July 2002

Colombia: Amnesty International meets President-elect in London

As Colombia's President-elect Dr Álvaro Uribe Vélez visits Europe before taking office on 7 August, Amnesty International representatives met with him and the ministers designated for Defence and Foreign Affairs today in London to discuss the country's human rights crisis and the organization's concerns about the potential effects of some of his announced policies.

"We welcome this opportunity to begin a dialogue with the incoming administration and to raise our concern that some of the measures he has planned to strengthen security could exacerbate further the human rights emergency affecting millions of civilians across the country," Amnesty International said.

"Security cannot and must not be obtained at the cost of sacrificing fundamental human rights, and the incoming government has an obligation to take all necessary steps to uphold these rights at all times: this is the key message we conveyed to Dr Uribe today," the organization added.

The organization noted a statement made by the President-elect yesterday to the effect that human rights are essential for security, but it insisted on the need for the new administration to develop a clear human rights policy as a matter of urgency.

The main issues raised in the meeting included:

suggestions that the new administration will reform the 1991 Constitution, and in particular some of its important human rights safeguards, which are among the most advanced in Latin America. These suggestions have led to fears that the new government will seek to abolish or weaken the role of the Constitutional Court, which has played an important role in upholding the human rights principles enshrined in the Constitution, and of the Office of the Procurator General and the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman.

plans to re-establish the President's faculty to call a state of siege, dropped in the 1991 Constitution, since it would give extraordinary powers to the armed forces and the Presidency for an unlimited period, and would facilitate human rights violations principally by removing judicial and legislative oversight over states of exception.

proposals to grant judicial police powers to the armed forces and to allow the military to carry out house searches and arrests without judicial authority. This not only runs against

the spirit of a recent ruling by the Constitutional Court, which threw out similar measures contained in the National Security and Defence Law, but also threatens to strengthen the mechanisms of impunity by covering up responsibility for human rights violations committed by the armed forces and their paramilitary allies.

Amnesty International is further concerned at Dr Uribe's plan to create a one million-strong civilian militia of informers, which the organization fears will only fuel the spiral of political violence and drag the civilian population further into the conflict, exposing those involved to retaliation from either side in the armed conflict;

"Despite the severity of the human rights crisis, there is a clear blueprint for action that the new government can and must adopt," Amnesty International said. This is based on the full and immediate implementation of UN recommendations on ending impunity, combating paramilitarism and protecting vulnerable social sectors, and on the UN Vienna Declaration signed by the Colombian government and another 170 States at the World Conference on Human Rights on 25 June 1993.

"By signing the Vienna Declaration, Colombia committed itself to adopt a Programme of Action on Human Rights. This should become a priority for the incoming government," Amnesty International continued, adding that such a Programme should be based on the recommendations repeatedly formulated by the United Nations and other international bodies.

Background

In the past month, Dr Uribe has been visiting a series of countries including the United States, Canada, France and Spain. During this time, Amnesty International has urged the international community to play a positive role encouraging the incoming administration to adopt concrete measures to uphold human rights. In consideration of the importance of economic interests in Colombia, the organization has also called on companies investing in the country to take a firm stand against human rights violations and to urge the Colombian authorities to tackle the human rights crisis.

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