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## **Colombia: Safety of municipal officials must be guaranteed**

*The Colombian Government must take urgent action to secure the safe release of the six mayors and their human rights adviser abducted by army-backed paramilitaries, Amnesty International said.*

*The men were reportedly abducted on Sunday 18 November 2001. The Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, Self-defense Groups of Colombia) -- in a letter to the Governor of the department of Antioquia, Guillermo Gaviria Correa, dated 19 November -- claimed responsibility for the abduction. In the same letter, the AUC condemned recent dialogues held between mayors of eastern Antioquia Department with members of the armed opposition group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army).*

*Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of the abductees, particularly in light that the AUC suggests in its letter that they are working towards 'Dark pacts' and their activity is strengthening the guerrilla.*

*"In the past, those accused of collaborating with guerrilla forces by the security forces and their paramilitary allies have often been the victim of serious human rights violations -- including extrajudicial executions and 'disappearances'," Amnesty International said.*

*This kidnapping coincides with reports that Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL, Popular Liberation Army) guerrillas have threatened to kill some of the 15 musicians they have been holding hostage since 10 November. The EPL has said the killings will take place within the next*

24 hours unless the Colombian Army withdraws from the area where they are holding the hostages.

"All people held hostage must be immediately released and their safety guaranteed," Amnesty International said. "All sides in the conflict must respect international humanitarian law and the right of the civilian population to life and to physical integrity and safety."

## **Background**

On 25 October 2001, 23 mayors of the department of Antioquia initiated dialogues with the Carlos Alirio Buitrago Front of the ELN to reach agreement on a truce which would last until April 2002. The purpose of the truce was to give time for the transfer of police stations from urban centres to other locations away from the civilian population or to create an alternative community police force, in order to avoid civilian casualties in military confrontations. The AUC condemned these contacts in its letter of 19 November 2001.

Guerrilla forces have been responsible for the majority of kidnappings and the taking of hostages, in 2000 they were responsible for 57% of the approximate 3000 cases. Amongst those currently being held hostage by the FARC are at least four members of the Colombian Congress.

Army-backed paramilitary forces have also resorted increasingly to kidnapping and hostage-taking. Members of the Colombian army and security forces and their paramilitary allies commit serious human rights violations with virtual impunity. In the last five years several thousand civilians have been killed by paramilitary groups. The Colombian government suspended the constitutional legal base for the formation of paramilitary organizations and issued directives to the armed forces to combat and disband such groups in 1989, yet they continue to work

*with the support of the security forces - by action or omission - in many areas of the country.*

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