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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE -- 18 APRIL 1997

PANAMA: AUTHORITIES' DEPLORABLE FAILURE TO KEEP THEIR PLEDGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CONCERNING COLOMBIAN REFUGEES

The Panamanian authorities' failure to keep their pledge to grant a UNHCR mission access to Colombian refugees who have fled to Panama to escape intense political violence is deplorable, and the authorities' decision to forcibly return up to 550 of these desperate people to Colombia is a callous one, Amnesty International said today.

The returning of refugees to Colombia was reportedly due to begin at 6 a.m. today Panamanian time, in spite of the Panamanian authorities' pledge to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to allow a UNHCR mission to visit the refugees. Such access has not been granted.

"We call once again on the Panamanian authorities not to resume forced returns and to abide by their international obligations towards refugees, most importantly the principle of *non-refoulement*, and to provide the Colombian refugees with effective and durable protection," Amnesty International said. "The pervasive violence in north-west Colombia means there can be no meaningful guarantees of safety for the refugees should they be returned."

The human rights organization repeats its plea to the Panamanian authorities to allow a UNHCR mission to visit the refugees and to negotiate with UNHCR in good faith.

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