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COLOMBIA: CHALLENGE TO GOVERNMENT TO PUT RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS BEFORE INTERNATIONAL IMAGE

Amnesty International is today challenging the Colombian Government to tackle the problems of political killings and "disappearances" rather than focus on human rights public relations exercises.

"It is public knowledge that the Colombian Government plans a public relations tour to Europe in June to counter criticism of its human rights record," Amnesty International said. "While they are simply concerned about their international image, we are concerned about the human rights issues."

The organization said, "The real issue is that the armed forces and their paramilitary auxiliaries continue to arbitrarily arrest, torture, murder and 'disappear' people throughout Colombia and the Colombian Government allows them to act with impunity."

The Colombian media has reported this past week that the Colombian Government sees an Amnesty International advertisement placed in newspapers in the United Kingdom (UK) as a threat to its good commercial relationship with the UK. Also reported is that the government is planning a public relations strategy to clean up its image in Europe.

"The government is apparently more interested in protecting its human rights image than protecting its citizens' human rights. If the Colombian Government is truly concerned about its image what it should be doing is taking serious steps to end impunity by ensuring that members of the security forces act within the law and those who do not are held to account."

Two months after Amnesty International launched a campaign on rising political killings in Colombia, the Colombian Government has not responded to the evidence of human rights violations the organization put forward or the recommendations made to improve human rights protection.

Since then, Amnesty International has presented further cases to the government which it has again failed to respond to. These include the possible extrajudicial executions of ten people including left-wing political activists, indigenous leaders and an eight-year-old child; the "disappearance" of eleven people, including political activists and peasant leaders; and death threats and attacks on the lives of at least 25 people. The real figures of serious human rights violations are believed to be even higher.

The organization has also condemned armed opposition groups for carrying out deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians as well as of soldiers and others who have fallen into their hands after capture, surrender or being wounded. Most recently on Friday 20 May, Amnesty International condemned the killing of Oswaldo Arturo Pájaro García whose body was found on 17 May two days after his abduction by ELN guerrillas and called for the immediate release of another man, Elbardo Galvis Barrera, abducted at the same time.

Fernando Brito, head of the civilian security agency, DAS, said on Thursday 19 May that he intended to "sue Amnesty International in international organizations" because the organization has said that DAS agents had been involved in human rights violations.

Amnesty International welcomes the opportunity for the cases of human rights violations to be investigated by an independent and impartial bodies, whether in Colombia or abroad. The organization has repeatedly called on the Colombian Government to set up an independent Commission of Enquiry where the truth can be established about human rights violations in Colombia and those responsible be brought to justice.

Amnesty International made other specific practical recommendations both to the government and to armed opposition groups when it launched its campaign against human rights abuses in Colombia in March this year.

"Until both the Colombian Government and armed opposition groups act upon these recommendations, no one's human rights are safe in Colombia," Amnesty International said.

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