
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 259/94

TO: PRESS OFFICERS
FROM: IS PRESS OFFICE
DATE: 14 NOVEMBER 1994

AI INDEX: NWS 11/259/94
DISTR: SC/PO
NO OF WORDS:680

INTERNAL

NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - **COLOMBIA** (For response only)

CORRECTION: SEE NEWS SERVICE 249/94 item on USA - Error in first paragraph. The last line of this paragraph should read "... over a period of six years, one has been convicted and others are awaiting trial."

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

Pakistan - 24/25/28 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 254/94

** Iraq - ** - POSTPONED, See News Service 258/94

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

Syria - 16 November

The news item enclosed is being sent to Middle East and Arabic media.

India - 27 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 256

Report to go with news item enclosed will be sent out in Weekly Mailing of 16 November (not 23 November as I said in NS 256). This item is intended for Indian media only (unless you wish to do something with it).

News Service 259/94

AI INDEX: AMR 23/WU 12/94
14 NOVEMBER 1994

COLOMBIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S SECRETARY GENERAL MEETS PRESIDENT SAMPER

Amnesty International's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, visits Colombia this week to meet President Ernesto Samper Pizano and members of his government to discuss implementation of the human rights program President Samper launched on 9 September.

Pierre Sané will express the organization's concern that despite commitments made by President Samper throughout his election campaign and since his inauguration in August, the human rights situation in Colombia remains grave.

According to the latest figures from a prominent Colombian human rights organization, there have been at least 34 political killings, eight reported "disappearances", 54 cases of torture, 43 arbitrary detentions, 51 cases of reported death threats, and more than 30 killings as a result of "social cleansing" operations in Bogotá and Medellín -- all in the first two months of President Samper's administration. Guerilla organizations have also continued to commit grave abuses including deliberate and arbitrary killings and the kidnapping and taking of hostages.

President Samper's human rights program, launched on Colombia's national human rights day, includes a firm commitment to tackle the impunity with which Colombian security forces commit human rights violations and to eradicate army-backed paramilitary groups, who have been responsible for thousands of killings and "disappearances" in recent years. The program also includes a promise to work closely with non-governmental human rights organizations, to protect human rights activists and to recognize the legitimacy of their work.

In his meetings with the Colombian Government, Pierre Sané will urge the immediate implementation of such measures. A recent upsurge in paramilitary activity, with two groups claiming responsibility for a series of killings and death threats against political activists, trade unionists and lawyers, makes the disbandment of paramilitary groups doubly urgent.

Pierre Sané will be saying that if the Colombian Government is serious about improving human rights in the country, it will take more than just statements of policy to bring about that change. It is the political will to act which will make the difference.

Unfortunately the government's political will has recently been called into question by its failure to overturn objections by former President Gaviria to a national draft law against "disappearances".

These objections risk rendering the law ineffective by guaranteeing the continued jurisdiction of the military justice system to investigate and try "disappearance" cases, thereby perpetuating impunity. Military courts -- as recently pointed out by the Colombian Procurator General -- have resulted in 100 per cent impunity in the cases of "disappearances" committed by members of the security forces.

The government's refusal to exclude "disappearances" from the military jurisdiction is of serious concern to Amnesty International because it sends a clear message to members of the security forces that "disappearances" as well as other human rights violations may be considered an "act of service" for which they will not be held accountable.

Pierre Sané will be visiting Baranquilla, Bucaramanga and Bogotá where he will be speaking to Colombians from all sectors of society and showing Amnesty International's solidarity with human rights victims and with Colombian non-governmental organizations who have recently launched an international human rights campaign. It is they who daily risk their lives campaigning for human rights protection in Colombia and they should be supported internationally in their cause.

ENDS\