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Colombia: Further violence in Catatumbo must be avoided

With the protests that resulted in the deaths of four people last week in Catatumbo, north-eastern Colombia, still continuing, Amnesty International insists that the authorities must ensure that the security forces refrain from using disproportionate and excessive force against the demonstrators.

"We are deeply concerned at the behaviour of the security forces during the protest. There are well-founded fears that disproportionate and excessive force has been used, in particular since the government's claims that the demonstrations have been infiltrated by guerrilla forces," said Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International's researcher on Colombia.

"The use of this kind of accusation by the government is, unfortunately, nothing new. Whenever a civil protest occurs, the Colombian authorities tend to claim that it is part of a guerrilla plan, instead of considering and addressing the causes of the protest," added Pollack.

Last year, Amnesty International documented a similar case in Cauca. The Association of Indigenous Councils of the North of Cauca (*Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca*, ACIN) was calling for an end to the fighting between the army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) guerrilla forces in the area. The Minister of Defence accused the indigenous movement of having been infiltrated by guerrillas. Not long after, Lisandro Tenorio, traditional healer and spiritual leader of the indigenous Nasa, was killed.

The protests in Catatumbo, Santander Department, began on 11 June. Thousands of peasant farmers have taken to the streets to demand the implementation of a Peasant Farmer Reservation Zone (*Zona de Reserva Campesina*) and a programme to substitute illicit crops.

Dozens of peasant farmers, as well as some members of the security forces, have been wounded during the protests, which are still on-going. Two protestors were fatally injured on 22 June and a further two on 25 June.

The four deaths occurred shortly after various authorities had claimed that the protests were being fuelled by FARC infiltrators. The Colombian President, Juan Manuel Santos, made such a statement on 21 June and the national police director in charge of public security repeated the claim on 24 June.

According to Amnesty International, there is evidence that the anti-riot police (ESMAD) and the armed forces have used excessive force in dealing with the demonstrators.

"We are calling on the Colombian authorities to ensure that the security forces refrain from using excessive and disproportionate force, and that their treatment of the demonstrators is in line with

international standards," stated Amnesty International's researcher.

"The security forces have a duty to guarantee public order but this must not be used as an excuse to ignore international standards on the use of force by security forces, as appears to have been the case in Catatumbo, " stated Pollack.

"There must be full and impartial investigations by the civilian justice system into the deaths in Catatumbo to establish if these were the result of an excessive use of force by the security forces," said Pollack.

Amnesty International's spokesperson also called on the authorities to publish the results of these investigations and to bring those responsible to justice.