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## **Colombian authorities fail survivors of sexual violence**

The Colombian authorities have failed to tackle the lack of justice for women and girl survivors during the country's long-running armed conflict, Amnesty International said in a new report today.

“Women and girls in Colombia are often treated as trophies of war. They are raped and sexually abused by all the warring parties as a way to silence and punish them,” said Susan Lee, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

“Since President Santos took office in 2010, the government has made clear commitments to tackle the human rights crisis but we have yet to see real improvements in bringing to justice those responsible for human rights abuses, such as sexual violence against women.”

Amnesty International's report, ‘This is what we demand. Justice!’ Impunity for sexual violence against women in Colombia's armed conflict, documents how the rights of survivors of sexual violence to truth, justice and reparation continue to be denied by the authorities.

The lack of reliable official statistics, and the fear around reporting such crimes, make it very difficult to evaluate the true scale of the problem. The statistics available do not clearly indicate cases of sexual violence against women and girls that may be conflict-related.

In 2010, the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Science carried out 20,142 examinations into suspected cases of sexual violence, compared to 12,732 in 2000. But only 109 of these were classified as being related to the conflict, underlining the invisibility of such crimes.

Even when women muster the courage to report a case of rape or sexual violence, these are rarely investigated effectively.

Barriers to justice include a historical lack of political will to combat impunity, ineffective protection measures for witnesses and survivors, poor gender training for judicial officials, and a lack of definitions in the national legislation on rape as a crime under international law.

Indigenous women survivors of sexual violence suffer additional hurdles, including a lack of translators, difficulties in travelling between remote areas and places where they can get official assistance, and the significant presence of combatants in the areas where they live.

“The Colombian authorities must implement an action plan to end sexual violence, including measures to combat discrimination against women and girls and to put a stop to the impunity which ensures that those responsible for such crimes are not brought to justice,” said Susan Lee.

Colombia's security forces, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups have all targetted women and girls to exploit them as sexual slaves and to effect revenge on adversaries.

Sexual violence sows terror within communities and forces whole families to flee their homes, allowing land to be appropriated.

Women and girls from Indigenous, Afro-descendent and peasant farmer communities, those forcibly displaced by fighting and those living in poverty are particular targets of sexual violence. Women human rights defenders and their families are particular targets of threats and intimidation.

Amnesty International spoke to many rape survivors in Colombia, some of whom sought to report the crimes to the authorities.

Carolina (not her real name) was a community leader in a town in Caldas Department, north west Colombia. When in 2007 Carolina's son was raped by a boy linked to the paramilitaries, she reported the crime to the authorities.

Members of the paramilitary group tried to get her to withdraw her complaint. When she refused, they threatened her and forced her to watch them mutilate some of their victims. In May 2007, Carolina was kidnapped and raped by eight paramilitaries. She subsequently discovered she was pregnant as a result of the rape. When the paramilitary commander found out, he ordered his men to beat her; she lost the baby.

In June 2007, the protection programme of the Office of the Attorney General rehoused her in another town. But the threats continued and so she was eventually relocated elsewhere. She was in the protection programme for a year, but is no longer receiving protection.

The case continued to be investigated in Caldas Department and the prosecutor called on Carolina to testify in the town where the crime took place and where the perpetrators still lived.

In September 2008, and after pressure from women's NGOs, the case was transferred to the Human Rights Unit of the Office of the Attorney General in Bogotá. However, the Unit has never called Carolina to testify.

In August 2010, the prosecutor was removed from the case. The new prosecutor has apparently only recently begun to review Carolina's case.

Amnesty International called on the Colombian authorities to develop a comprehensive strategy - in consultation with local organizations - to ensure effective prevention, investigation and prosecution of conflict-related violence against women, and to provide remedies to the victims.

"The Colombian authorities must take decisive action to ensure those responsible for crimes of sexual violence, many of which are either war crimes or crimes against humanity, are brought to justice. If the authorities continue to fail in doing so, the International Criminal Court should step in."