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Colombia: Government has to back its support for human rights with action

The Colombian government must back its public support for human rights with action, Amnesty International said in an oral statement delivered to the United Nations Human Rights Council today.

The Colombian authorities have accepted a number of recommendations issued by member states at the Council: many of them are devoted to fight impunity and effectively protect civilians caught up in the conflict.

“The public acceptance of these recommendations contrasts with some government policies and its actions,” said Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International’s researcher on Colombia.

While Amnesty International applauds Colombia’s commitment to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, it reiterates its concern over a new law that broadens the scope of military jurisdiction.

According to Amnesty International, the security forces, acting alone or in collusion with paramilitaries, have been responsible for serious abuses, including unlawful killings, forced displacement, torture, forced disappearances, and sexual violence.

“The new law entrenches impunity by making it easier for the military courts to assume jurisdiction for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed by Colombia’s security forces. Such courts have had a shameful record in failing to hold to account members of the security forces implicated in human rights violations,” said Marcelo Pollack.

Other legislation, such as the Legal Framework for Peace, which was approved by Congress last year, will also make it easier for other parties in the conflict, such as members of guerrilla groups, to evade justice for serious human rights abuses.

Amnesty International has long highlighted the failure of the Colombian authorities to effectively protect civilians from the serious human rights violations and abuses inflicted by the security forces, paramilitaries, and guerrilla groups.

Just last week, the organization raised awareness about paramilitary incursions in different areas of the Humanitarian Zones (Zonas humanitarias) of the Cacarica River Basin, in the Department of Chocó.

On entering the area, paramilitaries declared that they were in possession of a list of community leaders who they labelled as guerrilla collaborators. Community leaders, such as those on this list, are often the target of human rights abuses in the form of extrajudicial execution, forced disappearance or forced displacement.

“Despite knowing of these incursions, the Colombian authorities have done nothing to confront the paramilitary units. This failure to act puts the Afro-descendant communities of the Cacarica River at imminent risk,” said Marcelo Pollack.

“This is only one example of what happens in many areas of the country almost on a daily basis. The government is failing in its duty to effectively protect the civilian population.”

In its oral statement today at the UN Human Rights Council, Amnesty International stressed that respect for human rights and a commitment to end impunity must form the central pillars of the current peace talks.

The Colombian government is currently holding talks with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), guerrilla group in Havana, Cuba.

Peace talks with the second major Colombian guerrilla group, the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) could also start soon.

“An effective peace will necessitate a verifiable commitment from all parties to put an end to human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law,” said Marcelo Pollack.

“All those responsible for the serious human rights abuses that have occurred in some fifty years of fighting - whether members of the security forces, the paramilitaries or the different guerrilla groups - must be held accountable.”

Amnesty International has also expressed its disappointment in the Colombian government’s decision in July to only renew the mandate of the Office in Colombia of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for one year. It had previously committed to extend it for three years.

“The role played by the Office in Colombia has been pivotal: over the years, it has saved many lives and supported the invaluable work carried out by human rights defenders. The work of the Office will be equally critical, if and when a peace agreement is in place, by providing international scrutiny to ensure that human rights are respected, including the rights of victims to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition,” said Marcelo Pollack.

Amnesty International hopes that following elections next year any new government will renew the Office’s mandate for a three-year period, demonstrating its openness to international scrutiny.

“This would provide some proof that the Colombian authorities are serious about practically supporting human rights with action rather than relying on public statements,” said Marcelo Pollack.