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Iberoamerican Summit: The gulf between good intentions and harsh reality - Amnesty International proposes six points of action

The advances made since the first Iberoamerican Summit in 1991 have not been sufficient to tackle the root of the serious human rights violations which continue to threaten most Iberoamerican countries, Amnesty International said today.

In a statement issued in the run-up to the seventh Iberoamerican Summit of Heads of State and Government, the organisation denounced the persistence of extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", torture, the use of the death penalty, as well as the jailing of hundreds of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, attacks against human rights defenders and restrictions on the right of asylum.

"The Heads of State and Government gathered at the seventh Iberoamerican Summit must show a clear and resolute political will to commit themselves to the eradication of torture and the death penalty, while acknowledging the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders and ensuring that these human rights violations are eliminated. They must also immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, and end impunity at all levels of the State," Amnesty International said

Extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" continue to be reported in countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. In Colombia, for instance, more than 30,000 political killings have taken place since 1986, the majority of them perpetrated by the armed forces and paramilitary groups protected by them. The victims include civilians in areas of conflict, trade unionists and human rights activists and defenders.

Amnesty International also confirmed that armed groups in the region and in Spain frequently break the most basic humanitarian standards, committing abuses including deliberate and arbitrary killings, kidnapping, torture, hostage taking and the use of antipersonnel mines.

In the capital cities of many Iberoamerican countries, marginalised sectors such as homosexuals, prostitutes and drug addicts are targets for murder by so called "private justice" groups. Each year in Brazil, the police or "death squads" (which frequently include off-duty policemen) assassinate or "disappear" an alarming number of adolescents, street children and young adults.

In Venezuela, those classified as "outcasts", including children from poor districts, have been extrajudicially executed during police operations conceived "officially" to combat delinquency. In Argentina, circumstances surrounding the death of numerous young people point to the probable involvement of police in similar executions.

Amnesty International has also documented a tendency towards an excessive use of force in repressing social conflicts, trade union protests, and civil disturbances in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic. In 1996, in Costa Rica, many people were injured as a result of measures by the civil guard and private police to combat street disturbances caused by the privatisation of public services or to carry out land displacement operations.

Furthermore, the resurgence of the death penalty in Iberoamerica has served as a severe blow to the abolitionist trend. This has also placed a shadow over Spain's recent abolition of the death penalty, which had served to reinforce the trend that had been taking place in Latin America. In September 1996, after a period of 13 years, Guatemala restarted executions by killing two of its citizens. In 1995, the Guatemalan authorities openly transgressed the American Convention of Human Rights, by altering the Penal Code to extend the application of the capital punishment to new crimes.

Hundreds of people continue to be detained for their political opinions and religious beliefs, or for exercising their civil rights or being a conscientious objector. Amnesty International has adopted prisoners of conscience in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Spain, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay. In Cuba, some 600 prisoners of conscience are spending up to 15 years in prison for crimes linked to the peaceful exercise of the right of freedom of

expression and association. Hundreds of political prisoners have been subject to trials which violate the requirements of international standards, particularly those related to the right to a fair trial. In Peru, the National Office for Human Rights estimates that more than 600 prisoners have been falsely accused of terrorism related crimes.

Torture and ill-treatment continue to be common practice in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Spain, Mexico, Paraguay, Portugal, Peru and Venezuela, and there have been reports of beatings in police stations, asphyxiation, electric shocks and other forms of torture. In Portugal, ill-treatment while in police custody is relatively common, according to evidence from the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture. In 1996, Amnesty International recorded various cases of death in police custody in the country.

The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of human rights violations is another factor to be taken into account. This impunity is guaranteed by mechanisms like amnesties, often used by governments under the pretext of national reconciliation, as has been the case in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru and Uruguay.

The State has a duty to maintain social order, but the prevalence of human rights violations and impunity encourages the disintegration of the state of law. Social anxiety about delinquency cannot serve as a pretext for the armed forces to take the law into their own hands. Rather than providing security, the politics of fear devalues the institutions which practice and tolerate such abuses.

In accordance with the recommendations included in the statement to the Latin American Summit, Amnesty International calls on all those countries taking part in the meeting to abandon the rhetoric and turn their declarations into concrete action.