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## **Colombia: Thousands of civilians punished for not participating in conflict**

The Colombian security forces, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups are punishing those who refuse to be part of the conflict across Colombia, said Amnesty International today.

The organization's claim comes as it launches a new campaign on behalf of several "communities in resistance" – communities that have taken an active and often dangerous stand in defence of their right as civilians not to be dragged into Colombia's long-running and bloody armed conflict.

The Afro-descendant Humanitarian Zones of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó River Basins, in Chocó Department, and the campesino (peasant farmer) Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, in the department of Antioquia, are but two examples of such "communities in resistance" who have for years suffered attacks from both sides in the conflict for simply defending their rights as civilians not to be drawn into the conflict.

"Afro-descendant, indigenous and peasant farmer communities are among those most affected by the conflict," said Marcelo Pollack, Colombia researcher at Amnesty International. "For some, attacks are designed to scare other communities from organizing or to punish those which have already taken a stand, whilst in other cases these attacks are aimed at displacing communities from lands rich in natural resources or of strategic importance to one side or the other."

"Colombia's 40-year-long conflict is a story of countless shattered communities and human tragedies," said Marcelo Pollack. "Instead of punishing those who stand up for their right not to be part of a conflict, the security forces, paramilitaries and guerrillas should respect them."

Colombia's conflict has left whole communities isolated and trapped, unable to access food or medicine because of the fighting or due to transportation restrictions placed on them by the warring parties, who often argue that such goods are destined for their enemies.

Between 3 and 4 million people have been forcibly displaced by the violence in Colombia – people who had to leave their homes because of threats from all the parties to the conflict. This number is only second to Sudan.

Afro-descendant communities of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó River Basins have set up several Humanitarian Zones in the area in an effort to protect their members from attack and to protect their lands from encroaching illegal palm oil plantations, as well as to send out a powerful message to the warring parties that their rights as civilians must be respected.

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó was formed in 1997 and has since then has pledged not to participate in or be drawn into the conflict. Its members refuse to bear arms or to provide information or logistical support to either side. The security forces and paramilitaries continue to claim it is a subversive community, while guerrilla groups accuse it of siding with their enemies.

Since the Peace Community's establishment, more than 170 of its members have been killed or subjected to enforced disappearance. Last week, the Peace Community commemorated the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the killing of eight of its members on 21 February 2005. Judicial investigations have implicated members of the security forces and paramilitaries in the killing.

Amnesty International calls on the Colombian authorities to investigate and bring to justice all those responsible for human rights abuses against members of these "communities in resistance", and to take all urgent measures to guarantee their security, as deemed appropriate by the communities themselves.

All the warring parties must also respect the right to life of these communities, as well as that of other civilian communities, and ensure that they are not dragged into the conflict.

**Colombia: The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó: Communities in resistance**  
**<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR23/002/2009/en>**

**Colombia: The Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó humanitarian zones: Communities in resistance**  
**<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR23/001/2009/en>**