

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/085/2009
04 March 2009

Colombia: Authorities must guarantee safety of demonstrators

President Álvaro Uribe must make a strong public statement in support of the important and legitimate work of human rights defenders. Failing to do so risks giving a green light to those who wish to attack them, said Amnesty International today.

Amnesty International's call came in the run up to demonstrations scheduled to take place in Bogotá and other Colombian cities on 6 March in protest at human rights violations committed by the security forces. The demonstrations are being organized by the human rights coalition National Movement of Victims of State Crimes (Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado, MOVICE).

A number of Colombian trade unionists and human rights defenders were killed or threatened just before or soon after last year's 6 March mass demonstrations, also organized by MOVICE. Numerous Colombian human rights organizations also received email threats at the time, reportedly from paramilitary groups.

"The threats and killings that tragically marred last year's marches must not be repeated. The legitimate right of everyone to peaceful protest must be guaranteed by the Colombian authorities," said Marcelo Pollack, interim Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

Amnesty International calls on the Colombian authorities to guarantee the security of the organizers and the participants in this year's 6 March demonstrations. Amnesty International also calls on the Colombian authorities to impartially and effectively investigate last year's killings and threats, as well as all human rights abuses committed against human rights defenders, trade unionists and other activists, and to bring all those responsible to justice.

This year's demonstrations focus on the on-going problem of extrajudicial executions by the security forces. Over recent years, Colombian human rights organizations have sought to bring this problem to national and international attention and to demand action by the authorities. As a result of their work in exposing extrajudicial executions and the impunity that surrounds these cases, defenders have received death threats and have been publicly criticized by government officials, who suggest their work is part of a guerrilla strategy to discredit the security forces.

Background Information

Colombia's armed conflict has pitted the security forces and paramilitaries against guerrilla groups for more than 40 years. The civilian population continues to be the main victim of the conflict, with both sides repeatedly failing to respect the right of civilians not be dragged into the hostilities. All the warring parties – the security forces, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups – are responsible for systematic and widespread human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.