

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Colombia: 30-year struggle for justice continues despite Supreme Court ruling**

Colombia's Supreme Court of Justice yesterday overturned the conviction of retired colonel Luis Alfonso Plazas Vega for his role in crimes under international law. In 2010, Plazas Vega had been sentenced to 30 years in prison for the crime of enforced disappearance.

Twelve people were forcibly disappeared following an assault by the security forces on the Palace of Justice in Bogotá in November 1985 after the M-19 guerrilla group had taken hostage those inside. Some 100 people died in the assault, including 11 Supreme Court judges.

The Colombian authorities must now redouble efforts to ensure that the whole truth about what happened during the assault on the Palace of Justice comes out and that all those responsible are identified and brought to justice before the ordinary civilian courts.

The families of some of the victims have campaigned for truth and justice for 30 years. This struggle has been painfully slow and only two senior army officers had been convicted: Plazas Vega and retired general Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales, who was sentenced to 35 years in 2011. Both men appealed their convictions. Last year, the Superior Tribunal of Bogotá ratified Arias Cabrales' conviction, although his lawyers are appealing this decision. In 2011, retired general Iván Ramírez Quintero was acquitted of involvement in the forced disappearances, although the Office of the Attorney General and the victims' lawyers are appealing.

Some of the families and their lawyers, including Jorge Eliécer Molano Rodríguez and Germán Romero Sánchez, have paid a heavy price for their tenacity over the years. They have been repeatedly threatened with death and subjected to acts of intimidation because of their involvement in this case. Despite such adversity, those campaigning for truth, justice and reparation remain steadfast in their conviction that all those responsible must be held to account.

The Colombian authorities must ensure that effective measures are put in place to ensure the safety of those under threat, in strict accordance with the wishes of those affected.

### **Background**

The failure of the Colombian criminal justice system to advance investigations forced the

victims' families, in November 2013, to turn to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to ensure that their long fought for right to truth, justice and reparation was respected.

In November 2014, the Inter-American Court ruled that the Colombian state was responsible for 10 of the 12 enforced disappearances, and for one extrajudicial execution. The Court ordered the state to carry out an investigation to determine the truth, to identify and sanction those responsible and to establish the whereabouts of those missing.

On 6 November 2015, in a public ceremony ordered by the Inter-American Court, President Juan Manuel Santos assumed responsibility and asked forgiveness for the state's role in the enforced disappearance of 10 people, the enforced disappearance and extrajudicial execution of an 11<sup>th</sup> person, and the torture of several more.

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