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Colombia: humanitarian agreement needed instead of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law

The recent kidnapping of the presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, and her campaign director Clara Rojas, has been condemned by Amnesty International. The kidnapping is thought to have been carried out by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Amnesty International has urged the kidnappers to respect the rights to physical integrity of their victims and for their immediate release.

The kidnapping of the presidential candidate ahead of the presidential elections expected in May also increases fears for the safety of political activists who could face threats and human rights abuses at the hands of both parties in the conflict.

According to press reports, Ingrid Betancourt was kidnapped on Saturday 23 February 2002 by members of the FARC as she was traveling by car between the Caquetá municipalities of Florencia and San Vicente del Caguán. San Vicente del Caguán is in the former demilitarized zone (DMZ), controlled by the FARC in the south of the country.

"If the FARC are confirmed as being responsible, this kidnapping would represent a grave violation of international humanitarian law governing conflict situations. This law should be respected under all circumstances," declared Amnesty International, urging armed opposition groups to stop all kidnappings.

Amnesty International insisted on the right to life and immediate release of all civilian kidnap victims of armed political groups. The human rights organization also called on the FARC to respect the lives of 40 members of the security forces still held by them.

"At this critical point in the Colombian conflict, it is more important than ever that the two belligerent parties reach a humanitarian agreement in order to protect the civilian population," stressed Amnesty International, emphasizing that respect of civilians is one of the cornerstones of international humanitarian law.

"The world can no longer stand by and watch the tragedy of the Colombian conflict," added the organization. "The international community can and must play a key part in demanding the protection of the civilian population in the conflict, in bringing about a humanitarian agreement and insisting that armed political groups respect international humanitarian law. The international community must also insist that the government implement the recommendations repeatedly set out by the United Nations, particularly those concerning the ending of impunity, the dismantling and combating of paramilitary groups allied to the armed forces, and guaranteeing protection of human rights defenders and other threatened civilian sectors."

Further Information

Armed opposition groups, such as the FARC and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, (ELN), National Liberation Army have been responsible for a large number of kidnappings and hostage-takings. It is calculated that armed opposition groups and paramilitary organizations were responsible for more than half of the 3,000 kidnappings reported in the year 2000.

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Amnesty International fears for the safety of all kidnap victims whether taken by the FARC or other armed political groups, as well as for those in the hands of paramilitaries.

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