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Colombia: Every day of kidnappings is a day too many

Yesterday's broadcast of a video featuring former Presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who was kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on 23rd February 2002, reminded the world of the forgotten tragedy of over 1,500 Colombian civilians who are kidnapped yearly by guerrilla groups and paramilitary bands allied to the forces of public order, said Amnesty International today.

The human rights organization called urgently on all Colombian armed groups immediately and unconditionally to release all the civilians in their power.

"Hostage taking and kidnapping are a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law governing the conduct of armed conflict", stated Amnesty International, reiterating its condemnation of this abominable practice.

"The use of human lives to further political interests is totally unacceptable. The civilian population cannot and should not be used as bargaining chips", continued the organization, urging the armed groups to respect the right to life and the physical integrity of all their hostages.

"Kidnapping and hostage taking are a phenomenon which has grown to extremely worrying levels in Colombia" stated Amnesty International, underlining the fact that some 3,000 kidnappings were recorded in 2001.

It is estimated that approximately 60% of these kidnappings were carried out by guerrilla groups, while approximately 8% were attributed to paramilitary groups, who have stepped up their use of hostage taking. According to journalistic sources, at least four members of the Colombian armed forces were involved in the kidnapping by the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) of Venezuelan businessman Richard Boulton. Richard Boulton was freed last week, after two years in captivity.

"The time has come for all armed groups in the Colombian conflict to end this practice which is a serious violation of basic human rights and to fully respect standards of international humanitarian law concerning protection of civilian populations", concluded Amnesty International.

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