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Colombia: Time to make the right choice for human rights

As he takes office as President of Colombia on 7 August, Álvaro Uribe Vélez must not ignore his responsibility to make the human rights of all Colombians a priority, Amnesty International said today.

In a letter to the new President, the organization urged him to develop and implement a comprehensive and coherent human rights policy to address the increasingly critical human rights situation in the country.

"The new Presidency begins at a time when the human rights crisis in Colombia is spiralling and millions of people across the country suffer the daily consequences of political violence and human rights violations at the hands of both sides to the conflict," Amnesty International said.

"The new President is now faced with a basic choice: he can either take action to confront the human rights crisis or pursue policies that are likely to make it worse," the organization added.

The international community and human rights organizations have identified a blueprint for the basic action which the government should take to tackle the human rights emergency, summarized in the recommendations repeatedly made by the United Nations on ending impunity for human rights violations, combating paramilitary groups and severing their links with the security forces, and protecting human rights defenders and other vulnerable sectors of civilian society.

"Many of Dr Uribe's announced plans appear to run counter to the spirit of these recommendations and pose a real threat of fuelling further deterioration of the conflict, undermining the protection of civilians and strengthening the mechanisms ensuring impunity for human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

In its letter, the organization reiterated its concern over some of Dr Uribe's specific plans. These include plans to create a million-strong civilian militia of informers, which risks dragging the civilian population further into the conflict and consolidating the army-backed paramilitary strategy; proposals to grant judicial police powers to the armed forces and to allow the military to carry out house searches and arrests without judicial authority, which could facilitate the covering up of human rights violations perpetrated by the security forces or their paramilitary allies; and plans to re-establish the President's faculty to call a state of siege, which could facilitate human rights violations by removing judicial and legislative oversight and disregarding international safeguards on states of exception.

"Dr Uribe has been talking about Colombia needing a 'firm hand' to resolve the conflict, ensure security and address the ever escalating levels of violence. However, what is really needed is the firm political will to protect and guarantee the rights of all," Amnesty International said.

"Successive Colombian governments have consistently failed to do this and have allowed human rights to be sacrificed in the name of security and counter-insurgency strategies. Now is the time to understand that security cannot be achieved at the expense of human rights. Now is the time for the new President to make the right choice for human rights in Colombia," the organization concluded.

** For up to date information on the human rights situation in Colombia, and for the full text of the letter to President Uribe please visit:

http://web.amnesty.org/web/content.nsf/pages/gbr_colombia

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