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Colombia: San Vicente del Caguán -- A community abandoned

Madrid -- Labelled as guerrilla supporters by the security forces and their paramilitary allies; exposed to retaliation at the hands of armed opposition groups; abandoned by state institutions and the international community: the inhabitants of San Vicente del Caguán and of what was once known as the demilitarized zone are facing increasing levels of violence and human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict.

In a new report published today, Amnesty International highlights the plight of the civilian population living in the area which hosted peace talks between the Colombian government and the country's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The area was under effective FARC control for over three years, from October 1998 to February 2002, after the army withdrew from it as a precondition for peace negotiations to begin.

"The communities living in the demilitarized zone were never consulted about its creation and had no choice but to coexist with the FARC. Now, because of this coexistence, they are being stigmatized as guerrilla sympathizers and face serious risk of human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

"The people of the former demilitarized zone are effectively trapped in a no-man's land where the state authorities have abdicated their responsibilities to protect their citizens, and where civilian communities are vulnerable to abuses from both sides of the conflict as they implement strategies to secure control of the area," the organization added, noting how the level of political violence in the area has risen after the collapse of the peace process.

Since the breakdown in peace talks on 20 February 2002, the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office in San Vicente has recorded 17 politically-motivated killings, with 78 more being reported from the other four municipalities in the former demilitarized zone. Actual figures could be higher, but are hard to obtain due to the difficulties of gaining access to many rural areas.

Reports of human rights violations received from the area also include torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the security forces, repeated threats to civilian communities accused of siding either with the guerrilla or the armed forces, and the use of children as informers. The FARC continue to recruit children into their ranks.

Open confrontation in the area remains limited, and the two sides appear to be engaged in

preliminary strategies to gather information and undermine support for the enemy among the local communities.

On the one hand, FARC action appears to be aimed at intimidating the civilian population into submission and making the area ungovernable through threats and harassment against local authorities. On the other, the security forces continue to label many law-abiding citizens as guerrilla collaborators thus putting them under threat of retaliation from the paramilitaries, who are increasing their presence in the other municipalities of the former demilitarized zone.

"Not only have the people of the former demilitarized area been abandoned by the Colombian authorities -- which have not lived up to their promises of political and economic support -- to add insult to injury, they have also been deserted by the international community which had focussed high levels of attention on the area during the peace process," the organization added.

"Even now that the spotlight of the international media has moved away, the international community should continue to monitor the human rights situation in the area, to insist that the Colombian authorities take appropriate measures to protect the civilian population and that both sides to the hostilities respect international humanitarian law," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

The demilitarized zone (DMZ) was created in 1998 by then President Pastrana to facilitate peace talks with the FARC. The demilitarization of the area was asked by the FARC as a precondition for negotiations and remained in existence until the collapse of peace talks on 20 February 2002. The area, roughly the size of Switzerland, comprised five municipalities: Mesetas, Vista Hermosa, Uribe and La Macarena in the department of Meta, and San Vicente del Caguán in the department of Caquetá.

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