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Ecuador: Government faces human rights cross roads

The respect for human rights in Ecuador is at a cross roads, Amnesty International said today commenting on the worsening of the human rights situation under the new government of President Jamil Mahuad Witt.

“Since his coming to power last August, the authorities have implemented a set of measures which could result in a human rights crisis in the country,” the organization said.

While recognizing that the authorities in Ecuador are fully entitled to maintain law and order within the country and are faced by serious tensions, Amnesty International is calling on President Mahuad to publicly state his government’s commitment to human rights.

“International and domestic human rights standards must be respected, and the authorities should make it clear that abuses by the security forces will not be tolerated,” Amnesty International said.

The organization is closely monitoring the tensions through which Ecuador is currently living, and has already appealed to the authorities to respect fundamental rights during attempts to tackle the country’s social and economic problems.

The potentially serious downturn in the protection of rights has recently been exposed by the use of joint police and military operations during the current 60-day state of emergency in the province of Guayas and at checkpoints around Quito.

During the state of emergency, in and around the city of Guayaquil, hundreds of people have been arrested, held in overcrowded prisons, and then released without charge. At least two people have been shot dead by the security forces and others have been beaten.

The implementation of provisional checkpoints around Quito followed last week’s assassination of Jaime Hurtado and Pablo Tapia, parliamentarians of the opposition party *Movimiento Popular Democrático* (MPD), and of one other person.

In Quito, one person has been killed and three others detained after being accused of being accomplices of Colombians alleged to have carried out the killings. There is evidence suggesting the possible implication of the authorities in the killing of the two parliamentarians.

“An independent and public investigation into the death of the parliamentarians must be carried out immediately,” Amnesty International urged, seeking assurances that those detained in connection with this crime are not tortured and that the killing of the other suspect is also independently investigated.

In addition, the militarization of the river Putumayo border region, resulting from Colombian guerrillas allegedly sheltering in Ecuadorean territory, require that special vigilance be

given to the human rights of the civilian population in the area, including those of anybody detained on suspicion of collaborating with the guerrillas. ENDS.../