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Bolivia: Amnesty International calls for Human Rights Plan, action to prevent further clashes and protection for defenders

On concluding a visit to Bolivia, Amnesty International has asked the Vice-President and departmental authorities to take advantage of this moment in the country's history to draw up a plan to protect and promote human rights. The human rights organization also asked for measures to be put in place to help prevent further clashes like the ones that took place in recent months in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz leading to at least three deaths and dozens of injuries.

"These clashes amount to human rights violations because both the national and departmental authorities have failed to take action, exercise due diligence, carry out investigations and comply with their legal and international responsibilities. The dozens of victims we have interviewed expect to receive justice and protection from the authorities at all levels. It is essential for the authorities to give a clear signal that they are interested in promoting justice and ensuring that the victims do not carry on feeling defenceless," said Virginia Shoppee, the Amnesty International researcher on Bolivia.

The international human rights organization has documented clashes that have taken place between groups of civilians over the past few months. Amnesty International is extremely concerned about clashes which took place in Santa Cruz and Cochabamba in December and January respectively and were followed by the looting and burning of offices belonging to indigenous organizations, as well as about threats and intimidation which have continued in some cases.

Despite these events, it is a time for hope and historical change in Bolivia. The government has committed itself to eradicating poverty and exclusion and to governing with transparency, seriousness and responsibility. It should be possible for this commitment, which could form the basis for establishing a state based on the rule of law, to be articulated by drawing up a National Action Plan that meets the criteria laid down in the Vienna Declaration and Programme for Action which was adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993.

Such a plan should begin with a clear and emphatic message of reconciliation, respect and dialogue designed to prevent confrontation and division. It should include guarantees that the principles of equality and non-discrimination will be enforced and that all inhabitants of Bolivia will have equal rights to the protection of the law.

The plan should push for prompt, independent and impartial investigations to be carried out by the ordinary courts into any reports of human rights violations, including the rights to physical integrity and life.

In this connection, Amnesty International would like to call on the National Government and the departmental authorities of Santa Cruz and Cochabamba to express public support for the work and activities of human rights defenders. The Bolivian State should give its backing to the 2002 United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Amnesty International is making this appeal after having documented, in the course of the past few months, assaults on human rights defenders as well as acts of intimidation such as the firing of gunshots at local defenders and constant death threats.

"Human rights defenders are a fundamental part of any society. They should be free to monitor the work of the national and departmental authorities without fear of reprisal," said Amnesty International delegate Esteban Beltrán.

The delegation was also concerned to document assaults and threats directed against journalists in situations that indicate clear restrictions on freedom of expression. Journalists should have the right to carry out their work without intimidation and, as in any other country, have a basic responsibility with regard to the kind of information they transmit to society.

In interviews with the Vice-President and other government authorities, the human rights organization welcomed the agreement signed in February to set up an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bolivia. This is an encouraging signal that the Bolivian Government is interested in respecting and complying with its responsibilities and could help in developing the Human Rights Plan Amnesty International is calling for.

The human rights organization also asked the Vice-President about the work being done, within the framework of a Constituent Assembly, to draft a new Constitution. Amnesty International informed him of its conviction that the fundamental basis of the new Constitution should be for all human rights to be respected and promoted indivisibly. No right should be subordinate to another.

The Constitution should mean a step forward for human rights in Bolivia and be the framework for the rule of law, thus ensuring that freedom of expression and association, among others, are maintained. It is also an opportunity to make it possible for the Bolivian population to file claims before the courts with regard to rights such as the right to education and access to health.

"The common meeting point for all levels of society, regardless of views and political strategies, should be human rights. The leaders of all political parties as well as social leaders should give up any method of protest that jeopardizes people's wellbeing in order to avoid loss of life and damage to physical integrity," Amnesty International said.

Background Information

An Amnesty International delegation is visiting Bolivia from 23 February to 6 March 2007. The delegates are Virginia Shoppee, the researcher on Bolivia, and Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Director of the Americas Programme, both staff members at the International Secretariat in London, and Esteban Beltrán, Director of the Spanish Section.

The purpose of the visit is to gather information and documentation about reports of human rights violations and present the organization's concerns to the national and departmental authorities. In this connection the delegates have visited the cities of La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz and met with non-governmental human rights organizations, representatives of indigenous communities, victims of human rights violations and their relatives, the Ombudsman, members of the church and departmental authorities. In Cochabamba, they met with the Prefect, Manfred Reyes, and in Santa Cruz with three representatives of the Prefect, Rubén Costas Aguilera.

Between now and 6 March the delegation will have meetings with Vice-President Alvaro García Linera, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hugo Fernández, the Deputy Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Renato Pardo, and the Interior Minister, Alfredo Rada. The delegates will also meet with representatives of the diplomatic corps.

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