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Colombia: government should not undermine fight against impunity

Amnesty International today said that President Álvaro Uribe's decision to release Rodrigo Granda, the 'diplomatic representative' of the guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) -- who was last year convicted of rebellion -- as well as some 200 other FARC prisoners convicted of various conflict-related offences, must not pave the way for the unconditional release of paramilitaries and guerrillas who are currently under judicial investigation for serious human rights abuses.

The judicial authorities must continue to investigate and, if there is sufficient admissible evidence, prosecute those who through their political and financial backing of these groups, have been linked to human rights abuses.

More than a dozen members of the Colombian Congress are currently in detention while their suspected links with paramilitaries and possible links to human rights violations is investigated. It is of serious concern that press reports suggest that the government could also be planning to release and possibly grant de facto amnesties to these members of Congress before the current judicial investigations are completed.

Colombia has suffered endemic impunity for decades, as very few of the perpetrators of human rights abuses -- be they guerrillas, paramilitaries, or their sponsors -- have ever been brought to justice for grave human rights abuses, including the unlawful killing and enforced disappearance of tens of thousands of civilians in the course of Colombia's 40-year-old armed conflict.

Amnesty International believes that if the long-standing human rights crisis in Colombia is ever to be overcome, the effective disarmament and demobilization of both paramilitary and guerrilla groups should not be at the expense of the right of victims to truth, justice and reparation. The government must therefore not interfere in legal processes designed to uncover the truth about human rights abuses and to bring the perpetrators of these abuses to justice. Failure to do so will only serve to undermine the rule of law and further exacerbate the already high levels of impunity.

Amnesty International welcomes the investigations being carried out by the Supreme Court of Justice, the Human Rights Unit of the Office of the Attorney General and the Office of the Procurator General into the suspected links of influential politicians, high-ranking public officials and senior military officers with paramilitary groups accused of human rights abuses.

Amnesty International believes, however, that these investigations, which focus on allegations of past rather than current human rights abuses and links between state officials and paramilitaries, should not blind us to the reality of the human rights situation today, one in which hundreds of thousands of civilians continue to be forcibly displaced and thousands of others are victims of abuses carried out by all parties to the conflict, including unlawful killings and enforced

disappearance, and in which evidence of security force collusion with paramilitaries remains strong.

The organization said that the search for truth and justice in any conflict situation is fraught with difficulties and obstacles. But for such a process to be a real success, it must have human rights at its core. Investigating and bringing to justice perpetrators of serious human rights abuses ought to be the crucial component for achieving a just and lasting peace.

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