

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 23/002/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 026
9 February 2006

Embargo Date: 9 February 2006 00:01 GMT

Colombia: Attacks on freedom of expression threaten elections

Death threats and attacks against journalists, candidates and public officials are undermining the rule of law in Colombia and could raise doubts about the fairness of the elections, said Amnesty International (AI) in a new report published today.

The report reveals how journalists, political candidates and voters are under particular threat in the run up to the Congressional elections – scheduled for 12 March – and the Presidential elections – scheduled for 28 May.

Across Colombia, journalists have been killed or threatened to stop them from exposing human rights abuses committed by all the parties to the conflict. Candidates and elected officials have been forced to resign or have been killed as punishment for challenging the authority of the guerrillas or paramilitaries. Members of the security forces and government officials have sought to stigmatize some journalists by associating them with the guerrilla, thus placing them at risk of attack by paramilitary forces.

“Impunity lies at the heart of the Colombian conflict. The knowledge that perpetrators of human rights violations will evade justice deters victims from speaking out. As a result, journalists fear to report, candidates to campaign and elected officials to govern,” said Amnesty International.

According to AI’s report, journalists have been forced to censor their work – avoiding travelling to areas of intense conflict, where most human rights abuses and violations occur, and to rely only on official information. In this way human rights abuses, including those implicating members of the security forces, are not fully reported by the media.

The report also expresses concern about the influence which both paramilitaries and guerrilla are reportedly seeking to exert over the electoral process.

“It is legitimate for demobilized combatants, paramilitary or guerrilla, to participate in politics but only once they have irrefutably laid down their arms, that there are guarantees in place to ensure that they are not implicated in human rights abuses, that their political activities are not being backed by violence and other crimes, and that victims’ right to truth, justice and reparation are being fully respected,” said Amnesty International

“Physical protection measures provided by the authorities are insufficient without the political will to tackle the roots of the violence. The failure of the state to resolve the problem of impunity and the failure of

the parties to the conflict to abide by international humanitarian law, has made the work of journalists, candidates and officials more dangerous and, in some cases, impossible.”

Amnesty International is calling on the parties to Colombia’s armed conflict to guarantee the right of candidates and voters, those already in elected office and journalists covering the elections, to report, campaign, vote and exercise their office free from fear.

**For a full copy of: “Colombia: Reporting, Campaigning and Serving without Fear: The Rights of Journalists, Election Candidates and Elected Officials”, please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR230012006>**

Public Document

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