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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DEMANDS PROTECTION FOR THOSE WHO DARE TO DENOUNCE STATE-SPONSORED ABUSES IN THE AMERICAS, AND CALLS ON THE UNITED NATIONS TO TAKE ACTION

**Santafé de Bogotá** -- Those who dare to denounce state-sponsored repression, and to fight for justice and the rule of law, are being intimidated and terrorized in the face of government complicity or indifference, despite the invaluable contribution they make to the democratization, pacification, and social and political development of the region, said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International, at the inauguration today in Bogotá of an international conference on the protection of human rights defenders.

The conference, organized by Amnesty International, is entitled *Breaching the Walls of Silence* and is the first of its kind to take place in Latin America. The aims of the conference are to reinforce mechanisms aimed at protecting all those who dedicate themselves to the defence and promotion of human rights and to call international attention to the persecution faced by defenders, both in the region and in other parts of the world.

Other speakers at the opening session included Father Luis Perez Aguirre, from the Peace and Justice Service-Latin America; Yanette Bautista, President of the Latin American Federation of Associations of Families of the Detained-Disappeared; Professor Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Dr. Leo Valladares, the Human Rights Ombudsman of Honduras.

Human rights defenders have a special relevance in the Americas because, although the dictatorships have fallen, the region continues to have an appalling human rights record of violations committed by states, as well as atrocities carried out by armed opposition groups. People from all walks of life continue to risk their lives by speaking out against this situation.

“Throughout history and up to the present day, men and women in the Americas have demonstrated what is meant by persistence in the pursuit of human dignity, and thousands of those who have fought for justice and equality have paid the price with their lives,” Mr Sané said.

The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who continue to demand truth and justice, the peasant and indigenous leaders who try to protect their rights and those of their peoples to live on the lands they have always occupied, and Captain Lawrence Rockwood, the US soldier who defied orders and entered a prison in Haiti to prevent the killing and torture of detainees, are all examples of people who have taken up the fundamental rights of others as their own cause.

Some 60 human rights defenders will be participating in the Amnesty International initiative in Bogotá. The conference will extend over four days, during which the following four themes will be discussed:

how to use and reinforce the available national and international mechanisms for legal protection;  
human rights protection under the intergovernmental system;  
the role of campaigning, publicity and lobbying; and,  
practical measures for protection and for supporting and strengthening local non-governmental organizations.

Amnesty International also insisted on the need to finalize and approve a United Nations declaration aimed at the protection of human rights defenders. This declaration has been debated for more than a decade, and progress has been blocked by certain member states that have attempted to use the declaration as an excuse to introduce limitations and obligations on defenders.

“Human rights defenders in Colombia have gained international recognition and respect for their conscientious and dedicated work in defence of fundamental rights, which has enabled some of the truth of the dramatic and appalling catalogue of human rights violations in Colombia in recent years to become known. And for this reason, they have been attacked and intimidated,” Mr Sané said.

At least four human rights defenders have been killed in Colombia during the last two years: Jairo Barahona Martínez, Hermes Rendón Ochoa, Ernesto Fernández Fetzer, and Javier Varriga Vergel. Many other have been forced to leave the country after receiving death threats against themselves or their families.

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