

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index AMR 23/008/2002 - News Service Nr. 10

Embargoed for : 18/01/2002 15:00 GMT

Colombia: No peace and no future without human rights

There can be no true and lasting peace without full respect for human rights, Amnesty International said today as the deadline approaches for the Colombian government and the country's largest armed opposition group to agree on a timetable for renewed peace talks.

The organization urged the parties to the talks to make sure that the protection of basic human rights is at the heart of any further peace negotiations. As recommended by the United Nations, the government must take urgent action against impunity for human rights violations, to dismantle illegal paramilitary groups, and guarantee the security of particularly threatened sectors of the civilian population including human rights defenders, trade unionists, displaced communities, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. Guerrilla groups must respect international humanitarian law.

"Colombia has been ravaged by civil conflict for the past 38 years and the main victims have been civilians, who have suffered the most appalling human rights violations -- massacres, targeted killings, massive displacement, kidnappings -- at the hands of both parties to the conflict," Amnesty International said, adding that a breakdown of the peace process would bring about a humanitarian and human right crisis of unprecedented dimensions.

"Whether the peace process prospers or stalls, urgent action must be taken to guarantee the safety and physical integrity of a civilian population which has already suffered too much."

In the light of the ongoing debate on allowing the use of US military aid for counter-insurgency purposes, Amnesty International warned about the risk that pouring more arms and military materials into the country without attaching clear human rights conditions to their use will only fuel the vicious circle of escalating violence and spiralling human rights violations.

"The risk is particularly serious since the action of paramilitary groups -- responsible for the widespread and systematic violation of the human rights of civilians -- is an integral part of the Colombian army's counter-insurgency strategy," the organization added.

"Unless there are clear guarantees that US military aid will not be used in operations that put civilians and their human rights at risk, the scope of use of military aid should not be expanded -- the provision of such aid should stop altogether," Amnesty International said. "While paramilitary groups remain active and are part of the counter-insurgency strategy, these guarantees cannot be made."

The organization stressed that the international community has a very important role to play in facilitating the strengthening of human rights protection in Colombia and renewed its call on the group of the UN and the ten facilitating countries and on the international community at large to redouble their efforts to ensure that human rights are central to any discussion on the future of Colombia and to insist that both parties to the conflict implement UN recommendations.*

**Canada, Cuba, Spain, France, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Venezuela*

Background

In the context of Colombia's long-running internal conflict between the security forces in alliance with paramilitary forces and armed opposition groups, both sides have shown flagrant disregard for human rights and international humanitarian law.

The security forces have pursued a counter-insurgency strategy characterized by the systematic and widespread violation of human rights. Civilians in conflict zones accused of being guerrilla sympathizers or collaborators have subsequently been the victim of extrajudicial executions, "disappearance" and other serious human rights violations at the hands of the security forces and their paramilitary allies.

*Guerrilla forces, of which the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN, National Liberation Army, are the largest, have also been responsible for frequent and numerous deliberate or arbitrary killings and threats against those whom they consider to be collaborating with their enemies. They are also responsible for around 57% of the over 3,000 estimated cases of kidnapping and hostage-taking recorded in the country a year.*

A last minute agreement was reached on 14 January 2002 to restart the stalled peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC. Representatives of the FARC and the Colombian government have agreed to discuss the establishment of a timetable to discuss further the points set out in the San Francisco de la Sombra agreement of 5 October 2001 regarding a cease-fire and the end of kidnapping.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>