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PUBLIC STATEMENT

COLOMBIA

Killing of Dr. Umaña Mendoza – Colombian Government should tackle pattern of attacks against human rights workers

Amnesty International has learned with deep concern of the killing on 18 April of Dr. Eduardo Umaña Mendoza one of Colombia's most prominent human rights lawyers in his office in the capital, Bogota. In the wake of his death, the human rights organization calls on the Colombian Government to finally accept that there is a clear pattern of attacks against human rights defenders in the country, and effectively tackle this problem once and for all.

According to information received three people, two men and a woman, who identified themselves as journalists entered Dr. Eduardo Umaña's office, located in his apartment, in the Nicolás de Federmán district of Bogotá and killed him with several gunshots to the head.

President Ernesto Samper Pizano has made repeated commitments to do everything necessary to protect the lives and integrity of human rights workers. Amnesty International reiterates its call upon his government to stand by these commitments, and ensure that human rights workers can carry out their lawful activities without fear for their own lives or those of their families.

In June 1997 human rights defenders presented the Colombian Government with a series of proposals to help guarantee their safety. These included a call for members of the security forces responsible for human rights violations to be brought to justice, and for effective action to be taken to dismantle paramilitary groups. Human rights defenders also called for those members of the security forces supporting or operating in unison with paramilitary forces to be brought to justice.

If the Colombian Government had taken such decisive action Dr. Umaña Mendoza and other human rights workers might still be alive.

More recently, the 54th session of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights urged the Colombian Government to give special importance to the safety of human rights workers. The session called on the Colombian Government to implement the recommendations contained in the recent report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which urges the proper recognition of the right of human rights advocates to conduct their activities without fear for their lives.

Background

Dr. Umaña Mendoza was one of Colombia's foremost human rights lawyers and activists and had helped to found a number of Colombia's national non-governmental human rights organizations including *Corporación Colectivo de Abogados "José Alvear Restrepo"*, "José Alvear Restrepo" Lawyer's Collective, Sembrar and Minga. He was also an active member of the *Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos*, Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners.

As a human rights lawyer Dr. Umaña Mendoza represented numerous political prisoners and sought justice in many high-profile human rights violations perpetrated by members of the security forces. He played a prominent role as a lawyer for the relatives of the "disappeared".

Dr. Umaña Mendoza vigorously condemned the responsibility of the security forces in human rights violations and the high level of impunity which benefits those responsible for human rights violations. He vigorously confronted the Military Justice System as a mechanism of impunity.

His human rights work resulted in his being subjected to numerous death threats and several attempts against his life. His killing comes at a time when Amnesty International has been increasingly concerned for the safety of human rights defenders in Colombia, who have in recent years faced increasing harassment and intimidation, followed, as in this case, by their eventual killing.

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