Colombia: kidnapped plane passengers must be immediately released

The 47 passengers and crew of a hijacked internal Colombian flight should be immediately released without conditions, Amnesty International said today condemning their abduction.

"The hijacking of a civilian flight and the kidnapping of passengers and crew is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law," the organization added, calling on those responsible to respect the hostages' life and physical integrity.

Although no group has so far acknowledged its responsibility, the Colombian authorities have attributed responsibility for the hijacking and hostage taking to guerrilla forces. The fate of those taken hostage as well as the motives for the crime remain unclear.

The plane travelling from the city of Bucaramanga to Bogotá on 12 April 1999 was hijacked shortly after take off and forced to land on a clandestine air strip in the municipality of Simití, Bolivar department, an area dominated by right-wing paramilitary forces and left-wing guerrilla groups. The plane was later found abandoned on the air strip with no trace of crew or passengers. Evidence on the scene seems to suggest that the operation had been carefully planned and carried out.

The kidnapped passengers include 13 women, a 7 year-old child and a 3 month-old baby. Four of the hostages are foreigners and several are reported to have medical conditions which require treatment, including a 76 year-old Italian with heart problems.

Amnesty International has repeatedly condemned the taking and holding of hostages in all cases and reiterates today its grave concern at the escalating human rights crisis in the country.

"All parties to the long-running armed conflict in Colombia -- armed opposition groups, the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary groups operating with their support or acquiescence -- should ensure full compliance with the principles of international humanitarian law," the organization said.

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