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Colombia: Hostages must not be used as bargaining chips for peace

The taking of civilians hostage to press the government to engage in peace talks can never be justified and constitutes a gross violation of international humanitarian law, Amnesty International said today

In the last two weeks alone the armed opposition group, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), abducted more than 180 civilians, while the national paramilitary alliance, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), kidnapped a leading politician. Amnesty International condemns these incidents as a totally unacceptable practice by parties to Colombia's conflict.

"Respect for human rights is an essential cornerstone to building peace," the human rights organization said. "Taking civilians hostage -- and conditioning their release on the government's acceptance of conditions imposed for participation in peace talks -- is simply contemptible and will never lead to a society free from political violence and insecurity."

On Sunday, 30 May, a group of some 40 armed and uniformed men, believed to be members of the ELN, abducted 180 churchgoers during a mass in a Catholic church on the outskirts of the city of Cali in south-west Colombia. The guerrillas shot and killed the bodyguard of one of the churchgoers before driving the hostages into nearby mountains.

Pursued by army and police, the ELN released around 80 of the captives, including most of the children and some women. However, at least two children and several women are believed to be among the hostages still held. The mass abduction came six weeks after the ELN hijacked a domestic flight and kidnapped the passengers and crew. Although several have since been released, 25 are still held.

On 21 May, Piedad Córdoba de Castro, Liberal party senator and president of the Senate's Human Rights Commission, was abducted in Medellín, Antioquia department. The following day the AUC paramilitary leadership claimed responsibility for the abduction of Senator Córdoba and said she would only be released when the government granted AUC "*political recognition*" and a direct role in proposed peace talks between the government and the principal left-wing armed opposition movements. Senator Córdoba is renowned nationally and internationally for her work on human rights and peace. Efforts to secure her release have so far failed.

The ELN have repeatedly demanded the government agree to de-militarize an area in central Colombia in order to facilitate the start of peace talks. The government has so far refused the demand although it has accepted a similar demand to indefinitely de-militarize a large area in the south of Colombia where peace talks with the principal armed opposition group, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, (FARC) are currently underway.

"We have repeatedly condemned the taking and holding of hostages in Colombia and call for the immediate and unconditional release of all those currently held by armed opposition groups and paramilitary organizations," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization reiterates its call for 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 -- to ensure full compliance with the principles of international humanitarian law.

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