AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE

Colombia: Crisis and hope – Visit by the Secretary General of Amnesty International

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At a time when there has been a dramatic resurgence in the conflict in Colombia and with the presidential elections approaching on 26 May, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Irene Khan, will be visiting the country.

The visit, the first she has made to a Latin American country, will take place between 6 and 9 May. Her program will include a Round Table discussion with the main presidential candidates, as well as meetings with human rights organizations, victims and relatives of victims of human rights violations, representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited to the country and senior government officials.

Since the collapse of the peace process with the *FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the conflict in Colombia has intensified and the human rights of the civilian population have become increasingly affected.   In the face of this crisis, Amnesty International has reiterated its appeal to the parties in the conflict to reach a humanitarian agreement to protect civilians.

"Despite the seriousness of the situation, there is still room for hope", Irene Khan said, adding that the forthcoming elections offer a unique opportunity to place human rights at the centre of the political debate.

"At this extremely critical time for the country, I am coming to Colombia with the intention of encouraging the candidates to publicly commit themselves to upholding full respect for human rights by taking concrete action", the Secretary General of Amnesty International emphasized.

Among the most pressing action that is needed are measures to combat impunity, to confront the paramilitary groups who are linked to the armed forces, and to protect human rights defenders and legitimize the extremely important work that they do.

Irene Khan regretted that Ingrid Betancourt, who was kidnapped by the FARC in February, could not be among the candidates participating in the Round Table and called on the guerrilla group to immediately release both the presidential candidate and other civilian hostages they are holding.

"I wish to express my solidarity and that of the one million members of Amnesty International around the world, not only with the Betancourt family but also with all Colombians whose rights have been violated, as well as with the brave women and men who risk their lives on a daily basis to defend everybody's rights," Irene Khan said.

"It is time to put an end to the suffering of the thousands of people who are being harassed and threatened, of the relatives of those who have been murdered or 'disappeared', and of the millions of people who have been displaced.   Security must not be used as a pretext to justify violating fundamental human rights.   On the contrary, human rights are a key component for guaranteeing security" Irene Khan said in conclusion while at the same time expressing the hope that her visit would

help to make the international community and international public opinion aware of the humanitarian and human rights tragedy that is taking place in Colombia.

Amnesty International firmly believes that, despite the seriousness of the situation, there are steps that the new government can and must take, particularly with regard to fully complying with United Nations recommendations. The international community also has an important role to play in this sense. The recommendations put forward by the United Nations can be used to lay the basis for an action plan designed to bring the human rights crisis in Colombia to an end.

For further information, please contact the mission press team in Colombia on cell phone 033 262 2259.