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COLOMBIA: WOMEN IN COLOMBIA CONTINUE BEING VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND ABUSES

Women in Colombia, particularly in rural areas, have been the victims of persistent abuses by armed forces, their paramilitary allies and armed opposition groups -- abuses which have been carried out with impunity, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

As women increasingly assume leadership roles in their local communities, professional associations and grassroots movements, they face a growing risk of political killings, threats, intimidation, ill-treatment and torture, including rape and sexual abuse.

"The Colombian government must not allow women to become victims of human rights abuses simply because they, their partners or relatives are politically active; or because they live in areas where guerrilla forces are active and are automatically considered by the armed forces to be guerrilla sympathizers or supporters," the organization said.

Human rights activists have been particularly singled out for harassment and intimidation by the security forces and paramilitary organizations -- many under the command of the armed forces. In several cases, there is strong evidence that members of the Colombian armed forces have been directly responsible for the killing and "disappearance" of human rights defenders.

Blanca Cecilia Valero de Durán, mother of three children and secretary of CREDHOS, the Barrancabermeja-based Regional Human Rights Committee, continued her work for many years despite constant intimidation. On 29 January 1992 she was shot dead by two men in civilian clothing as she left the CREDHOS office.

"It is outrageous that the situation in Colombia is such that three policemen watched the attack without attempting to intervene. They did not try to catch the assassins, who escaped and have never been caught," said Amnesty International.

In January 1994 a Colombian newspaper reported that two naval officers had testified to the Attorney General about how their secret Naval Intelligence Unit assassinated some hundred trade unionists, teachers, journalists and human rights workers, including Blanca Cecilia Valero.

Although the Colombian government has committed grave human rights violations, armed opposition groups in that country have also contributed to the spiral of abuses.

"We have received persistent reports that in areas with a guerrilla presence, women who socialize with members of the armed forces and police have been harassed, threatened and - in several cases - killed by members of armed opposition groups," Amnesty International said.

Some guerrilla groups have resorted to the practice of abduction and forcible recruitment of young women from rural areas where they operate. Other women have been kidnapped and held hostage by guerrilla organizations - something that has become increasingly widespread as ransom money has become one of the principal sources of income for guerrilla groups.

Women holding public office, such as mayors and local councillors, are held hostage for political reasons, either to press for the implementation of guerrilla proposals or to demand publicity for their policies.

"The Colombian authorities and leaders of armed opposition groups must ensure that women's human rights are respected," Amnesty International said.

In particular, Amnesty International asks the Colombian government to increase protection for women by:

- ending torture, including rape and sexual abuse, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions
- investigating all reports of "disappearances", extrajudicial executions and torture, including rape and sexual abuse
- bringing those responsible for human rights violations to justice
- judging perpetrators of human rights violations in civilian, and not military, courts
- dismantling paramilitary groups and bringing members responsible for human rights violations to justice
- not tolerating the practice of killing, abducting or torturing women to pressure their relatives
- compensating victims of rape, sexual abuse and other torture or ill-treatment, as well as relatives of victims of "disappearances" or extrajudicial execution.
- training law enforcement personnel and other government agents
- guaranteeing that women activists can carry out peaceful activities without risk of jail or harassment.

Amnesty International urges the leaders of armed opposition groups to:

- observe minimum humanitarian standards
- investigate abuses by guerrilla combatants in order to determine responsibility
- remove individuals suspected of committing or ordering abuses against women from any position of authority and all duties which bring them into contact with captives.

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Should you require further information please refer to Amnesty International's report: *Women in Colombia: Breaking the Silence* (AI Index: AMR/23/41/95).