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ECUADOR: HUMAN RIGHTS TEST-CASE IN DANGER OF BEING SHELVED

There appears to be a deliberate attempt by the Ecuadorian authorities to have a prominent human rights test-case shelved, Amnesty International said in a letter made public today to President Sixto Durán Ballén of Ecuador.

The case, involving several marines implicated in the extrajudicial execution of school teacher Consuelo Benavides, is expected to be shelved if the trial before the Supreme Court of Justice is not concluded by this coming December.

"In the event of such an outcome, it will be further evidence of the institutionalized impunity which characterizes human rights cases in Ecuador," Amnesty International said. "Allowing the killers of Consuelo Benavides to go free will be a dark day for the cause of human rights in the country."

It will also be an affront to the relatives of Consuelo Benavides who for so long have fought to see her killers brought to justice and punished.

Consuelo Benavides was detained in December 1994. A peasant leader detained with her, and later released, testified that he saw her in the custody of the marines. Days later the body of a woman was found discarded near a highway. However, it was not until November 1988 -- almost three years later -- that the judicial authorities made public identification of the body as that of Consuelo Benavides.

In August 1995 -- close on ten years since Consuelo Benavides was killed -- the trial opened of only some of those implicated in the case. The main suspect, a navy captain charged with the murder of Consuelo Benavides, is at large after having escaped from a Quito high-security detention centre earlier this year.

Under Ecuadorian law, if judicial proceedings in a murder case are not concluded with a final verdict within ten years of the crime having been committed, those responsible can escape being punished.

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