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Ecuador: state of emergency cannot justify human rights abuses

A state of emergency cannot be used as an excuse for disregarding fundamental human rights, Amnesty International said today in a letter to the President of Ecuador Jamil Mahuad Witt, following the enforcement of a national state of emergency last week.

“No matter how exceptional the circumstances, abuses such as summary killings, torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary arrests should not be tolerated,” the organization said.

Amnesty International recognizes the authorities’ duty to maintain law and order. However, the organization is urging them to make clear to all involved in enforcing the emergency measures -- including the heads of the different branches of the security forces and penitentiary system -- that basic human rights must be respected at all times.

“The rights to life, freedom from torture and freedom of conscience -- as enshrined in international humanitarian law -- cannot be suspended under any circumstances,” Amnesty International said.

“The inclusion of human rights guarantees in Ecuador’s new Constitution has been an important step forward in the creation of a human rights culture in Ecuadorean society,” the organization continued.

“Even in this time of crisis the authorities’ actions must live up to the commitment made in the Constitution.”

Amnesty International’s letter -- which will be made public -- makes reference to human rights abuses committed since President Mahuad’s government took office. These include:

- the abduction and killing of trade unionist Saúl Cañar Pauta in November 1998,
- the assassination last February of opposition parliamentarians Jaime Hurtado and Pablo Tapia of the *Movimiento Popular Democrático* party, together with one other person,
- the situation of those suspects linked to the assassinations who are presently in detention, and
- the death threat against opposition parliamentarian Kaiser Arévalo of the *Pachakutik - Nuevo País* party.

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