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Mexico: New President must break with legacy of human rights violations

Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto must implement immediate and concrete measures to tackle some of the country's most pressing human rights issues, including abuses in the context of the public security crisis, said Amnesty International in an open letter.

According to Amnesty International's research, human rights violations such as enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detentions and lack of access to justice became routine during the previous administration.

"Peña Nieto's positive discourse regarding human rights, including commitments to move ahead with the General Victim's Law and reform of laws criminalizing enforced disappearances, are welcome but promises and good intentions are not enough to eradicate and prevent human rights violations," said Javier Zúñiga, Special Adviser at Amnesty International.

"A very good first step President Peña Nieto can take as commander in chief of the armed forces is to instruct them to respect human rights or face the consequences. "

During the elections, Enrique Peña Nieto replied to an Amnesty International letter to candidates making a number of policy commitments if elected.

"We want to remind the new President of his promises during the campaign and see concrete actions, including the development of a human rights programme in conjunction with all relevant sectors of society, including the judiciary, local authorities and human rights defenders, one that includes concrete proposals to tackle Mexico's human rights crisis," said Javier Zúñiga.

"Time is running out for Mexico. President Peña Nieto must not waste another six years with failed human rights policies and add more victims to those left by President Calderon."

Amnesty International's letter details a number of priority issues which the new President must urgently address in order to strengthen respect and protection of human rights in Mexico, including:

Public Security: Human rights abuses committed by the security and police forces in the context of operations to fight organized crime have become systematic over recent years, as has the lack of effective investigations into the abuses. Peña Nieto's decision to support the General Victim's Law is an important recognition of the rights of the thousands of victims of the violence, but it is essential that all public security initiatives protect human rights and justice in practice not merely in rhetoric.

Military justice: The deployment of more than 50,000 army and navy personnel in law enforcement roles has resulted in a sharp rise in reports of human rights violations. These have been dealt with by the military justice system which has resulted in a systematic lack of justice for victims. The recent rulings by

the National Supreme Court to exclude cases of human rights violations from the military justice system are a positive step. However, the Military Justice Code must be reformed to ensure all alleged abuses are investigated, prosecuted and tried by the civilian justice system.

Human rights defenders: The president must clarify the government's commitment to fully fund and back the new protection mechanism established in consultation with human rights defenders' and journalists' organizations. The new administration must also ensure effective investigations into attacks and harassment of defenders and journalists, including where public officials are implicated.

Migrants: Peña Nieto must specify new and effective measures to tackle the wave of killings, disappearances, rape and other human rights abuses by criminal gangs, often operating in collusion with public officials, against migrants in Mexico.

Torture: Torture and ill-treatment has become a systematic practice during the Calderon administration. Information obtained under torture is still accepted in court and few complaints result in full investigations. The proposal to reform the legal framework to fight torture at the federal and state level is positive but only by implementing a range of concrete policies and actions will torture begin to be eradicated.

Disappearances: The level of abductions and disappearances in Mexico is shocking, as is the lack of investigations into most cases. A proposal to reform the legal framework to fight enforced disappearances is a positive step. The proposal must meet international human rights standards and the government needs to ensure radically improved measures to fully investigate all reported abductions, including establishing a national database to help identify and locate victims.

Justice system: Over 98% of crimes, including human rights abuses, end in impunity. The authorities must ensure that ongoing reforms to the justice system improve capacity and reliability of judicial measures to hold perpetrators to account while guaranteeing rights of victims and accused.

Violence against women: Recent legislative advances have not translated into a reduction of cases of violence against women. The President promised Amnesty International to take action on this key issue but it is worrying that no concrete measures are proposed in the Pact for Mexico. The government must take a leading role to strengthen prevention, investigation and punishment of violence against women and respect for women's rights.

Indigenous Peoples: Peña Nieto's commitment to fight discrimination against one of the most marginalized groups in society is positive, but any policies adopted must ensure that Indigenous communities are at the centre of decisions about their own development and their rights are respected.

Inter American Court of Human Rights: Peña Nieto's government must comply with all aspects with the binding judgement issued against Mexico by the Inter American Court of Human Rights during the last administration.