

## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL EU OFFICE PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: IOR.61/013/2004

News Service No: 133/04

28 May 2004

### **EMBARGO: FRIDAY 28 MAY 08.00 BRUSSELS TIME (06.00 GMT)**

## **EU-LATIN AMERICA SUMMIT: EU TALKS MUST GIVE GREATER PRIORITY TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

(Brussels 28 May 2004) Amnesty International is urging the Irish EU Presidency to insert stronger language on the protection of human rights defenders into the conclusions of the EU-Latin America summit in Mexico today (28 May) and make this issue a priority in discussions with regional leaders in particular from Mexico and Colombia.

Amnesty International said it was ironic that although "social cohesion" is one of the key topics of the summit, human rights defenders, who play a crucial role in building social cohesion, are not on the agenda.

"The serious situation in the host country Mexico, where the judicial system is being misused to harass human rights defenders, does not appear to be on the agenda at all for discussions between the Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the Mexican President Vicente Fox," Dick Oosting, Director of Amnesty International's EU Office said.

"This is not only regrettable, but surprising given the Irish Presidency's public commitment to enhancing EU support for human rights defenders. Yet when a major summit like this is held in a region where human rights defenders are under constant attack, human rights defenders barely feature on the agenda," he said.

"Human rights defenders need concrete EU steps to ensure their protection, not just new rounds of applause for their efforts. Amnesty International welcomes plans to adopt EU guidelines to support human rights defenders at the next meeting of EU Foreign Ministers in June. But now is the time for the EU to speak out - in Mexico," Dick Oosting said.

### **Examples of harassment of human rights defenders**

In Colombia, one of the most dangerous countries to be a human rights defender, there are ongoing judicial investigations on charges of corruption and rebellion against members of the organization "Justice and Peace." They appear to form part of a strategy designed to discredit the organization, divert attention from legitimate human rights work and punish activists for seeking accountability of high ranking military officials implicated in human rights violations.

In Mexico, indigenous leaders Isidoro Baldenegro López and Hermenegildo Rivas Carrillo have been imprisoned for over a year on the basis of fabricated evidence because of their campaign to stop logging in community forests. Despite clear evidence that the criminal charges are fabricated, the authorities continue to seek their prosecution.

"These cases symbolize the reality that hundreds of human rights defenders experience on a daily basis in the region. The situation is now so serious that concerted efforts are required at the regional and international level to address these abuses," Dick Oosting said.

### **Amnesty International recommendations**

The EU and Latin American countries should use their gathering in Mexico to:

- put in train concrete political, legal and practical measures to ensure the immediate protection of human rights defenders and improve the environment in which they operate.

The EU should call on its Latin American partners to:

- put an end to the misuse of judicial systems to harass human rights defenders;
- remind them of their duty to ensure human rights defenders have equal access to the law;
- ensure that judicial investigations and proceedings against human rights defenders are conducted in accordance with international fair trial standards.

**For further comment/background and interviews:**

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