

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/190/2010
11 June 2010

Colombia: human rights abusers must not be protected from justice

The Colombian government must not protect military officers from prosecution for human rights violations, Amnesty International said today.

President Álvaro Uribe and the military high command yesterday called for the armed forces to be protected from civil prosecution, following Wednesday's sentencing by a civilian judge of retired colonel Alfonso Plazas Vega for the disappearance of 11 people during the 1985 Palace of Justice siege in Bogotá, which left over 100 people dead.

"Shielding the security forces from prosecution would make a mockery of government claims that it is serious about fighting impunity and respecting its international obligations to bring all human rights abusers to justice," said Marcelo Pollack, Amnesty International's Colombia researcher.

The retired colonel faces 30 years in prison for his part in disappearances that took place in November 1985, after military forces stormed the headquarters of the judiciary where members of the M-19 guerrilla movement were holding those inside hostage.

Defending the senior army officer, President Álvaro Uribe yesterday reportedly said that the colonel was "simply trying to do his duty" and suggested that the military justice system be strengthened to prevent similar convictions in the future.

Despite repeated recommendations from international human rights bodies and a 1997 Constitutional Court ruling that such cases be investigated by the civilian justice system, the military courts have continued to claim jurisdiction in some human rights cases, protecting members of the security forces from prosecution.

"Several high-ranking military officers have over the last few years been investigated by the civilian courts, despite military resistance to civilian jurisdiction," said Marcelo Pollack.

"But the little progress made so far is now seriously at risk of being undermined by the government."

"The government and the military high command's intemperate and very public criticism of the decision to convict retired colonel Plazas Vega is only the latest of many attempts by the authorities to discredit the judiciary and to derail a key human rights criminal investigation."

"In particular, repeated attacks on the integrity of magistrates from the Supreme Court of Justice have threatened the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law."

"Judges such as María Stella Jara Gutiérrez, who convicted Plazas Vega, and the Supreme Court magistrates,

who have led the investigation into links between Congress and paramilitary groups, have worked tirelessly to break down the walls of impunity,” said Marcelo Pollack.

Some of those involved in emblematic criminal investigations into human rights violations committed by security forces, such as witnesses, victims and their families, lawyers, human rights defenders, judges and public prosecutors, have been repeatedly harassed, threatened or even killed.

“The fight against impunity in Colombia is a dangerous occupation. The repeated death threats against María Stella Jara Gutiérrez, and the threats against several Supreme Court magistrates, as well as reports that they were subjected to illegal surveillance and wire-tapping, is a cause of serious concern, and should be unequivocally condemned,” said Marcelo Pollack.

The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights has requested that the government adopt the necessary measures to protect the life of María Stella Jara Gutiérrez and her son. In the past, it has also made similar requests with regards to several Supreme Court magistrates.