URGENT ACTION

PROTECT CIVILIANS IN CATATUMBO

Since 16 January armed violence has erupted in the Catatumbo region (north-east Colombia) due to confrontations between the armed groups National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish) and General Staff of Blocks and Front (EMBF in Spanish), a dissident group of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish), resulting in reports of killings of dozens of civilians, massive forced displacements of thousands of people, and heightened risks of forced confinements, more killings and enforced disappearances. We call on the Colombian authorities to urgently take all necessary measures to protect civilians in the Catatumbo region, including human rights defenders.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

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Presidente de la República
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Dear Mr. President

I'm writing to express my deep concern with the risk faced to the life, safety and security of the civilian population in the Catatumbo region of Colombia, including human rights defenders.

Since 16 January, armed violence in the Catatumbo region has been reported including the killing of civilians and heightened risks of massive forced displacements, forced confinements, more killings and enforced disappearances. Civil society organizations in the region are calling for the armed groups to respect the life and safety of the civilian population and the adoption of measures to protect them. Even though evacuation efforts have been registered in the last days and Colombian authorities have vowed to protect the civilian population, more actions are needed to guarantee their life and safety.

Amnesty International has observed and reported on the situation of violence and hostile environment suffered by human rights defenders and civil society organisations in Colombia, including in the Catatumbo region, marked by extreme poverty, high levels of militarization and armed violence, the impact of forced eradication of coca leaf, the lack of support to economic alternatives, and the lack of access to health, food, education, water and housing. Despite a decrease in military activity and measures of forced eradication of coca leaf since 2023, actions were inefficient to guarantee the population's economic and social rights. Today, civilian population in the Catatumbo region face again the impacts of armed violence on their human rights.

I urge you to exercise the utmost diligence in adopting measures to protect them through mechanisms of prevention and collective protection, and to guarantee their safety, including that of human rights defenders, social leaders and their communities.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Located in the north-east of Colombia, in the Norte de Santander department, the Catatumbo region stretches between the Eastern Andes and the vicinities of Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela. This is a region rich in natural resources, particularly oil, and where extreme poverty, high levels of militarization and violence, and the lack of access to health, food, education, water and housing have created a hostile environment for social leadership and human rights defence activities. Furthermore, the region lacks infrastructure and connection with the rest of Colombia and remains as one of the primary enclaves of coca leaf crops and coca production in the country.

Amnesty International has followed the situation of violence against human rights defenders in the Catatumbo region for several years, focusing on the Catatumbo Social Integration Committee (CISCA). Since 2020, Amnesty International has pointed out that CISCA's human rights work has been hindered by two major collective risks factors: the high levels of violence in its area of influence, particularly against those in position of social leadership, and the activities of forced eradication of coca leaf crops. Amnesty International has also recognized that extreme poverty and lack of access to economic and social rights create a tense and hostile environment in the region, particularly for social leaders.

Amnesty International found that by July 2023 Colombian authorities had ceased the forced eradication of coca leaf operations and that there was a relative decrease in military activity in the region, both by State security forces and armed groups. However, the long history of militarization and the humanitarian impact of the armed conflict had not allowed for the consolidation of a safe environment for social mobilization and human rights works, especially considering that actions of armed groups had continued or even intensified in neighbouring areas.

Now, a year and a half after that, armed confrontations between armed groups returned, causing concerns over the safety of the civilian population, including human rights defenders, social leaders and former members of the FARC-EP demobilized in 2016. On 16 January, confrontations between two armed groups, the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish) and dissident groups of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish) under the name of General Staff of Blocks and Front (EMBF in Spanish) were reported. Amid the heightened armed violence in the region, media, UN representatives in the country, national authorities and social organizations reported the killing of civilians, including social leaders and former members of the FARC-EP demobilized in 2016. That was followed by expressions of concern regarding high risks of further killings, and massive forced displacements, forced confinements, and enforced disappearances.

On 18 January the Ombudsperson's Office reported preliminary figures of approximately 60 killings in the Convención, Ábrego, Teorama, El Tarra, Hacarí and Tibú municipalities and highlighted the special risk faced by people in social leadership positions and/or those who are former members of the FARC-EP demobilized in 2016, given public statements made by the ELN armed group against them. The Ombudsperson's Office also reported forced displacements of Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities, among them 850 families that arrived to Ocaña, nearly 2.500 people that arrived to Tibú, hundreds of families that arrived to Cúcuta, and at least 60 persons that arrived to the Zulia region in Venezuela (according with the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs). On 19 January, the Ombudswoman reported at least 11.000 people forcibly displaced in the region.

Colombian authorities have claimed that their priority is protecting the civilian population. According to that, evacuation efforts have been registered in the last days. Nonetheless, the risk persists, and further measures are needed to guarantee their protection.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Spanish.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 3 February 2025.
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME: Civilians in Catatumbo [they / them]

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: N/A