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Amnesty International Documents Human-Rights Abuses in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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In a scathing report issued in mid-March, the London-based human rights organization Amnesty International said that Colombia's "atrocious" record of more than 20,000 politically-motivated killings during the last eight years places that country among the world's worst violators of human rights. The report, titled "Political Violence in Colombia: Myth and Reality," specifically listed the Colombian armed forces and its "paramilitary allies" as responsible for the "majority" of the political killings committed in Colombia since 1986.

In contrast to Peru, where government security forces have been directly implicated in extensive human rights abuses, the Colombian government has been relatively successful in masking official involvement, according to Amnesty International. The Colombian government typically attributes the violence to a combination of activities related to drug trafficking cartels, rebel groups, and common criminals. But the Amnesty report attempts to draw a clear distinction between the large number of violent deaths which occur in Colombia each year and politically-motivated rights abuses.

The report acknowledges that the majority of people who die violently in Colombia are victims of common crime. But the report emphasizes that in the case of political violence, the Colombian government has fallaciously blamed drug cartels or extremists of the right or left. The report also addresses the "myth" that government authorities have done everything possible to stop the killings. In reality, says the report, "the government agencies that are supposed to guarantee human rights do very little to protect them." The report also highlights the impunity of individuals responsible for such crimes.

In Bogota, President Cesar Gaviria's administration angrily rejected the charges contained in the report. Government spokespersons criticized Amnesty for having failed to document human rights abuses by guerrilla groups. Nevertheless, the report contains an entire section documenting such abuses, including the use of landmines, arbitrary killings of civilians, and kidnappings for ransom.

For his part, Defense Minister Rafael Pardo said Amnesty had unfairly taken advantage of past problems in the Colombian judicial system in investigating murders, simply placing blame on the armed forces for all unsolved cases. Pardo characterized the report as a "manipulation of statistics" and questioned Amnesty's motives in releasing the document.

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