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Amnesty International, IAHCR Highlight Human Rights Abuses in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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The Colombian government has once again come under fire for the dismal human rights situation in the country, and in particular for the continued impunity enjoyed by members of the armed forces guilty of abuses. During the past six weeks, both the London-based Amnesty International (AI) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comision Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, CIDH) have issued scathing reports on the systematic violation of human rights in Colombia and the lack of minimal protections for Colombian citizens.

On the weekend of May 14-15, AI published full-page paid advertisements in various British newspapers, charging the government and the armed forces with responsibility for the vast majority of abuses committed against civilians in Colombia. The action by AI was the most recent of several this year targeting the Colombian government. For example, in April the AI office in the United States sent a letter to Congress requesting continuation of the current freeze on military aid to Colombia, and the suspension of additional aid requests, because of AI's concern that such aid goes to groups both official and paramilitary responsible for human rights abuses.

In March AI released a detailed report, "Political Violence in Colombia: Myth and Reality," in which the organization said it had confirmed official complicity in many of the 20,000 political assassinations that have occurred in the past eight years. Colombia's Public Defender, Jaime Cordoba, who is in charge of improving the human rights situation in the country, called the latest AI charges "exaggerated." Cordoba said AI has failed to recognize efforts by the Colombian government to improve the human rights situation. Such improvements allegedly include a reorganization of police departments that has led to the firing of many corrupt police officers; modernization of the army; and appointments of public prosecutors who will insure greater accountability by both the police and the military.

Defense Minister Rafael Pardo denied the AI charge that the government tolerates systematic assassinations by the police and military. "I think the major violators of human rights are the guerrillas, terrorists, and members of organized crime, and those are the people the armed forces are fighting," Pardo said. Concerned about the country's international image, Foreign Minister Noemi Sanin called in Colombia's 14 ambassadors to countries in the European Community on June 2 for "consultations." The Colombian diplomats met with the ministers of defense and interior, the attorney general, and the presidential advisor on international affairs, as well as Sanin. In the wake of this and other government initiatives designed to minimize the impact of the reports, a spokesperson for another human rights organization criticized the government's tactics.

Gustavo Gallon, director of the Colombian branch of the Andean Commission of Jurists, said, "The problem of human rights is not a problem of image but one of resolving the causes." Gallon said the government has refused to investigate ten cases dating back to 1987 in which his organization

had found that government forces were directly responsible. "We are concerned about the state's attitude toward these cases," he said. President Cesar Gaviria, using the occasion of signing into law new statutes governing states of emergency, said, "The lack of objectivity by some human rights organizations does not obscure the commitment that the government has made regarding the defense of human rights, a commitment that the Colombian people recognize."

According to Gaviria, government efforts include the creation of the Public Defender's office, institution of the right to legal protection and appeal (*recurso de tutela*), as well as the procedures and conditions required for imposing a state of emergency. Gaviria defended his public-order policies, which have come under fire from human rights organizations for their potential for abuse by security forces. "They are a democratic response to the phenomenon of violence," Gaviria said.

Meanwhile, on June 3, the controversy over the AI report was exacerbated by distribution of the equally strong CIDH report on Colombia's human rights situation. The report by the CIDH, which is run by the Organization of American States (OAS), states that flagrant abuses are being carried out by the state and by paramilitary groups acting at its behest. The 393-page report is based on two extensive visits by CIDH personnel and includes interviews, statistics, and recommendations. According to CIDH spokesperson Leo Valladares, the report is the culmination of a five-year investigation on the human rights situation in Colombia.

The CIDH report was critical of the country's military court system and of trials against civilians in special "war councils." The commission expressed concern about the continuing violation of human rights, the large number of victims, the brutality involved in many of the killings, and the impunity that most perpetrators enjoy. The commission also criticized the Colombian government for its failure to adequately investigate and penalize the practice of torture by its security forces. In addition to examining rights violations by the government, the CIDH report criticized human rights violations by guerrilla groups, which it said have been terrorizing the civilian population for years. The report also devoted a chapter to abuses committed against indigenous people in Colombia.

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