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Amnesty International Finds Widespread Human Rights Abuses in Latin America

by LADB Staff

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The London-based human rights group Amnesty International released its 1998 Annual Report in June. The group says few countries pay attention to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights adopted 50 years ago. The report criticized US military aid to Mexico and Colombia, as well as police abuse and the use of the death penalty in the US. In the section on the Americas, AI said, "Widespread and endemic impunity continued to hinder the path towards a new future for human rights in the Americas."

Other findings relating to South America include:

Argentina. One prisoner of conscience was held throughout the year. Torture and abuse by police has increased. Journalists and human rights workers continue to be threatened, and some killings could have been extrajudicial executions. In addition, the police are cited for obstruction of investigations of allegations of torture and abuse, persecution of homosexuals, and possible extrajudicial killings. Government authorities were criticized for failing to cooperate with investigations into the disappearances that occurred during the dictatorship.

Bolivia. Human rights defenders were subjected to threats and attacks. At least one extrajudicial execution occurred. Torture and mistreatment of detainees were reported.

Brazil. Hundreds of people were killed by the police and death squads tied to security forces. Human rights workers were threatened and attacked, and those who carry out such acts enjoy impunity. Land reform activists are often charged with crimes, apparently for political motives. Police torture and abuse are common. Death squads, often made up of off-duty police, operate with impunity in at least nine states.

Chile. The military again petitioned the Supreme Court to close all investigations into past abuses. Human rights defenders received death threats. Denunciations of torture by security forces continue.

Colombia. Hundreds of people have been killed by security forces or paramilitary groups operating with their backing or consent. Many victims were tortured before being killed. Despite convictions, paramilitary leaders remain at large and operate freely in heavily militarized areas. Human rights workers have been threatened or attacked, and at least 10 have been killed. At least 140 people have been "disappeared." Death-squad style killings continue in urban areas. Hundreds of people, including union members, human rights workers, and social activists were arrested and tried for political offenses in disregard of international norms.

Ecuador. One prisoner of conscience was jailed for four weeks. New denunciations have been made of torture and abuse. Five "disappearances" and at least six extrajudicial killings were reported. Authorities failed to clarify or bring to justice those responsible for past human rights violations.

Paraguay. Various campesino leaders were arrested and intimidated because of agrarian conflicts; one was assassinated. Accusations were made of mistreatment of prisoners, some of them minors, by the police.

Peru. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience remain jailed. At least 3,000 prisoners accused of terrorism are serving sentences or awaiting trial under conditions that do not meet international standards. Many prisoners have been held for years without trial. Government opponents and human rights workers have been intimidated, including by armed assailants and with death threats. Frequent denunciations of torture have occurred. Prison conditions are reported to be harsh, and treatment of prisoners is often cruel, inhuman, or degrading.

Uruguay. Two former political prisoners have not had their release upheld by the Corte Suprema de Justicia. Reports have been received of mistreatment of prisoners during a protest. Violations of human rights committed in the past have not been resolved.

Venezuela. At least 10 prisoners of conscience were arrested in 1997. Security forces routinely use torture and in some cases the victims have died. Prison conditions have become worse. Scores of people, including children, were extrajudicially executed by security forces. [Sources: Amnesty International 1998 Annual Report; CNN, Spanish news service EFE, 06/17/98; Notimex, 06/17/97, 06/18/98; Clarin (Argentina), 06/18/98; Associated Press, 06/19/98]

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