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PANAMA: AUTHORITIES SHOULD IMMEDIATELY END FORCED DEPORTATION OF REFUGEES FROM PANAMA TO COLOMBIA

Following the repatriation of 88 Colombian refugees -- who fled to Panama a week ago to escape from political violence in north-west Colombia -- Amnesty International is urgently calling on the Panamanian authorities not to deport a further 200 refugees still in Panama.

“We find it alarming that the Panamanian authorities -- with the cooperation of the Colombian Air Force -- have repatriated refugees to the extremely volatile Urabá region where they face a serious threat to their lives,” Amnesty International said today.

“The authorities of both Panama and Colombia should recognize that these people are refugees fleeing political violence and should take all necessary steps to ensure their safety.”

Amnesty International is calling on the Panamanian Government to fulfil its obligations under international human rights standards not to deport anyone to a country where they are at risk of serious human rights violations.

According to reports received by Amnesty International, a group of some 400 peasant farmers -- mostly residents of Unguía, Chocó Department\* -- fled to Panama after violence broke out between leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary units operating in the region. On arrival in Panama, the refugees set up improvised camps in Darién province, but as soon as the Panamanian authorities were aware of their presence they organized their return to Colombia in collaboration with the Colombian Air Force, which provided an aeroplane and returned the first group on 23 November.

A large number of those who are fleeing the violence in Urabá region are women, elderly people and children. The group of 88 refugees deported on 23 November included 32 minors. After their repatriation from Panama, the refugees were housed in the *Hogar Juvenil de Apartadó*, Apartadó's Children's Home, where reports indicate they are living in cramped, unsanitary conditions. Furthermore, the rural and urban areas of Apartadó are experiencing a high level of paramilitary violence at the moment. At least 75 other peasant farmer families are said to have arrived at the urban centre of Apartadó over the weekend, trying to escape from the violence in the countryside.

Given the present degree of political violence in Urabá, the safety of the refugees and other people fleeing from the region cannot be guaranteed if they are returned to Urabá.

In view of the possible increase in the numbers of people trying to escape Urabá by fleeing to Panamanian territory and other areas, Amnesty International is calling on both governments to cooperate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and to take all necessary steps to protect the lives and ensure the well being of the Colombian refugees. Both governments should respond to any specific recommendations issued by the UNHCR.

Amnesty International also urges the Panamanian authorities to put an immediate end to the deportation of refugees, and to protect those refugees still remaining in Panamanian territory.

The Colombian Government, through its *Programa Nacional de Desplazados del Ministerio del Interior*, Ministry of Interior's National Programme for the Displaced, should ensure that the 88 refugees already returned to Colombia by the Panamanian authorities, as well as other internally displaced peasant farmers reportedly fleeing the violence, are protected from serious human rights violations and receive all the necessary humanitarian assistance.

“This problem will keep escalating unless the Colombian authorities act now to address the root causes of the recent violence in Urabá, which has caused the deaths of many peasant farmers and caused others to flee,” Amnesty International said.

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\* The area of Urabá in north-west Colombia covers parts of the departments of Chocó, Antioquia and Córdoba

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The escalating political violence in the Urabá region between the Colombian armed forces, their paramilitary allies and three armed opposition groups has claimed the lives of many civilians. The vast majority of the hundreds of victims in recent months have been civilians pressured to support rival armed groups. The Colombian government has done nothing to protect the civilian population. In one of the latest incidents, on 23 November, army backed paramilitary members are said to have shot five people dead in Apartadó. It has also been reported that at least four peasant farmers were killed last week by suspected left-wing guerrillas.

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