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Colombia: authorities must respect due process in arrests over Bogotá explosions

The authorities must respect due process and ensure an impartial investigation in the case of 15 people, most of them human rights defenders and student activists, arrested yesterday in the capital Bogotá in connection with last week's explosions in the city, Amnesty International said today.

On 2 July, two small explosive devices were detonated in Bogotá leaving several people injured but no fatalities. The authorities attributed the attack to the guerrilla group National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN).

In setting off these explosives in the city, with the high risk to civilian life that this entailed, those responsible clearly showed a complete disregard for human life. The authorities have a duty to investigate any criminal activity and bring to justice those suspected of criminal responsibility through an independent and impartial process which conforms to international law and standards.

However, they must not use these events to criminalize and impede the work of human rights defenders. During Colombia's long-running armed conflict many human rights defenders have been prosecuted in order to silence and discredit them.

Most of those arrested are also active in the social movement, the People's Congress (Congreso de los Pueblos), some of whose members have been subjected to death threats and harassment for their work in defence of human rights. In January, one of the leaders of the People's Congress, Carlos Alberto Pedraza Salcedo, was killed in Bogotá.

Colombian human rights organizations have also recently reported a significant increase in death threats against human rights defenders and social activists.

Many of those arrested yesterday have been actively engaged in supporting the peace process, the rights of peasant farmers, and education issues, among other human rights and justice causes.

Criminal proceedings against human rights defenders and social leaders in Colombia have often been based on spurious evidence rather than on evidence gathered in the course of impartial criminal investigations by the civilian investigative authorities.

It is of serious concern that the presumption of innocence of those arrested has apparently been violated in public statements made by some public officials and through the media.

The authorities must ensure that the credibility and integrity of the legitimate work of human rights defenders is not undermined during the investigation.