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Colombia: Agreement on a bilateral ceasefire and cessation of hostilities is an historic step forward

The agreement on a definitive bilateral ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, signed today in Cuba by the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), is an historic step in efforts towards signing a peace deal between the two sides, Amnesty International said today.

However, the agreement will only come fully into force after a peace deal is signed, most likely in the next few months. Nevertheless, today's announcement brings ever closer the prospect of an end to a 50-year-old conflict marked by crimes under international law and serious human rights violations and abuses and by the failure to bring to justice those suspected of criminal responsibility in such crimes.

The agreement sets out the mechanisms by which the FARC will demobilize and disarm- to be completed within 180 days after the signing of a peace agreement – as well as the steps the authorities will take to guarantee the security of FARC combatants during their demobilization, including measures to combat paramilitary groups (referred to as criminal gangs by the government), which continue to operate despite their supposed demobilization a decade ago.

A de facto ceasefire has been in effect since last year. However, all the parties to the conflict continue to commit serious human rights abuses and violations, especially against Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendent and peasant farmer communities. Of particular concern was the increase last year in killings of and threats against human rights defenders and community leaders, at least 19 of whom were also killed in the first three months of 2016.

Most of these attacks, many of which are attributed to paramilitary groups, are not occurring in the context of combat and are often motivated by economic interests. Many of those communities and groups at particular risk of attack are precisely those campaigning against the exploitation of their lands and territories by mining, infrastructure, industrial and agro-industrial concerns.

As such, any definitive ceasefire may do little to halt such attacks unless the measures outlined in the agreement serve to effectively protect those groups and communities at risk of attack, identify all those behind such attacks and bring those allegedly responsible to justice.

The international community can play an important role in demanding more decisive action by the Colombian authorities to guarantee the safety of these groups and communities. In this context, the UN Security Council's establishment of a political mission of unarmed international observers to monitor and verify compliance with the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities is an important development. However, since the threat to human rights will not likely emanate primarily from possible violations of the ceasefire or cessation of hostilities agreement but from targeted attacks against civilians, for it to be effective any such mission must include a human rights component and work hand-in-hand with a strengthened Office in Colombia of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

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