

## PRESS RELEASE

### UN High Commissioner for Human Rights concludes visit to Colombia

1 November 2008

BOGOTA -- On 1 November, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, concluded a 6-day visit to Colombia, where her Office has a large presence. The High Commissioner met with the highest civilian and military authorities in the country, including President Alvaro Uribe, senior ministers, the judiciary, other national and local authorities in Bogota and the Department of Arauca to discuss a range of human rights concerns. Ms. Pillay also met with civil society representatives, including human rights and women NGOs, victims associations and trade unions.

Government officials briefed the High Commissioner on progress made to promote accountability and respect for human rights across government agencies and within the armed forces. Ms. Pillay acknowledged the efforts made by the Government to protect vulnerable groups in a country facing such a complex and multifaceted conflict. However, the High Commissioner expressed concern that while Colombia has made progress in implementing human rights policies, grave human rights challenges remain.

The High Commissioner reiterated the United Nations position that all hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally. ***“The systematic, protracted and widespread taking of hostages, kept under the most inhuman conditions, could be considered as a crime against humanity”*** said Ms. Pillay during a press conference held in her Office in Bogota. ***“We must ensure that following recent ‘high level’ releases, the plight of all other hostages is not forgotten,”*** she added.

Both in Bogota and Arauca, the High Commissioner heard testimony of many relatives who stated that their loved ones had been arrested and detained often for periods of two years or more on the basis of not always well founded accusations. Ms.

Pillay cautioned against arbitrary detention and arrest, and urged relevant authorities to ensure that accusations made are well founded. She also expressed concern at other grave violations of international humanitarian law taking place in the context of the armed conflict.

While commending the efforts made by Government institutions to guarantee the rights of internally displaced persons, Ms. Pillay expressed concern at the high number of old and new displaced persons in many areas of the country as a result of the conflict, of guerrilla activity and of the planting of illegal crops - ***“More security measures are required to prevent displacement and to better protect those already displaced,”*** she said.

On extrajudicial executions, the High Commissioner urged the Ministry of Defense to continue working so that central orders are enforced at the operational level.

Expressing encouragement at the recent dismissal of Army Officers, including three Generals for failure to exercise proper control over those under their command, the High Commissioner said that ***“this is a hopeful indication that such atrocities will not be tolerated and that the Army is moving away from ‘counting bodies’ as criteria of success in their operations.”***

With regard to the implementation of the justice and peace law, the High Commissioner stated that its implementation should be expedited to ensure justice for all victims. Ms. Pillay urged the Government to avoid *de facto* amnesties for past and current serious human rights abuses and to ensure that respect for the rights of victims remain at the core of any demobilization policy. She added that reparation for victims should include a land restitution programme for those who lost their land and benefit equally victims of illegal groups as well as State agents. In this respect, the High Commissioner stated that ***“a good opportunity to further promote the rights of all victims will be the new law on reparation for victims is currently debated in the Colombian Congress.”***

The High Commissioner applauded the brave work of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General’s Office in investigating and bringing to trial public officials linked

to mafias and drug trafficking in the so-called “Para-politics.” She called for support in their efforts and for maintaining the independence of the Colombian judiciary.

The High Commissioner conveyed her alarm that illegal armed groups continue to victimize and target the civilian population. She also expressed concern at the vulnerability of human rights defenders, trade unionists, journalists and public officials who are stigmatized and often targeted or threatened for their work. “***We should all persevere to ensure their protection and public recognition of their invaluable work,***” she declared, adding that the Government and civil society should join forces to address more effectively the challenges facing the country. She expressed great sadness at the assassination, on 31 October, of a municipal ombudsman in the Department of Antioquia, Mr. Jairo Luis Álvarez Ruiz. While offering her condolences to the victim’s family, colleagues and friends, she condemned in the strongest terms this crime and called upon the Government to energetically investigate the killing, find and sanction those responsible.

Ms. Pillay noted that while Government programmes to promote equality in education and opportunities are impressive, women remain the main victims of displacement, as well as of violence, inequality and discrimination.

Mentioning the plight of indigenous peoples and Afro-colombians, who informed the High Commissioner about the discrimination and racism they face, she urged the Government to continue in its efforts to promote the rights of these two groups in particular, reminding that “***as a former victim of institutionalized racism in my own country, I take this issue to heart***”.

The High Commissioner was pleased that all interlocutors, including the Government, pointed to the benefit that her Office has brought to Colombia. “***The international community should carry on assisting Colombia in promoting and protecting human rights in the country.***” She added that the upcoming examination of Colombia in the Human Rights Council, on 10 December 2008, would be a good opportunity to assess progress made by Colombia as well as ongoing challenges.