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Experts Name Positive Transitional Justice Outcomes in Latin America

Bogotá Meeting Highlights Successes, while Calling for Continued Efforts on Accountability and Justice

NEW YORK, July 6, 2007—Despite the notable achievements made by several countries in Latin America to deal with the legacies of massive human rights atrocities, significant challenges remain in the region, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) said today, drawing conclusions from its recent conference on the topic, held in Bogotá, Colombia.

"By upholding the rights of victims and ensuring the compliance of state obligations regarding truth, justice, reparations and institutional reform, the Latin American experience has provided invaluable lessons about the importance of facing the past," said ICTJ President, Juan E. Méndez. "Despite a diversity of experiences in the region, the collective message that has emerged strongly demonstrates that equating reconciliation with silence and impunity is an illusion that is both dangerous and doomed to fail."

From June 19-21, the Center—in collaboration with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and with support from the Canadian, German, Spanish, and Swedish foreign ministries and the Embassies of Chile, Mexico, Argentina, France and Peru in Colombia—co-hosted a three-day international seminar, "The Legacy of Truth: Transitional Justice and Democratization in Latin America." The seminar received also the support of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Development Program and the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia.

The gathering in Bogotá—where the ICTJ opened an office in 2006—featured rich debate among participants. The conference aimed to examine the effects of transitional justice efforts in the strengthening of democratic institutions in the region and brought together a diverse group of legal experts, government representatives, human rights activists, and journalists to discuss lessons learned, highlight best practices, and devise strategies for continued work in Latin America.

Among the discussions, there emerged a general agreement that the Latin American experience—which comprises a wide array of truth-seeking process, trials against former heads of state, overturned illegal amnesties, and reparations programs—has proven to be deeply influential for the broader development of the transitional justice field. Drawing on that context, conference participants discussed ways to identify best practices from Latin America to promote international human rights and humanitarian law around the world.

Conference participants also reviewed the record of TJ measures in Latin America. While applauding the progress made in the struggle against impunity, they also recognized the continued challenges faced throughout the continent, particularly in the field of institutional reform. In many countries, unaccountable security forces and weak judiciaries discourage citizens from seeking legal avenues to affirm their rights. Participants also pointed out at several lines of action in a regional TJ agenda, including practical research, security sector reform, stronger protections for human rights defenders, a clear linkage between TJ and the protection of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and victim-centric reforms of the justice system.

Several new TJ initiatives in the region were reviewed in informal meetings during the conference, which expressed its solidarity and support to representatives of the recently established Truth Commission in

Ecuador, the “Sao Paulo Declaration” announcing an effort to declassify archives in Brazil, and news of a local truth commission in the state of Guerrero in Mexico.

“Our hope is that continued TJ activity in Latin America will further strengthen democracy and rule of law by denying legitimacy to violent authoritarian agents, whose records have been exposed through truth commissions and trials,” said Mendéz, “By empowering victims and other marginalized populations, providing sound reparations policies, and contributing to effective institutional reform of those entities responsible for abuse in the past, we hope to see democracies that are closer in practice to the ideal so many Latin Americans have given their life for.”

The Center will publish the proceedings of the conference shortly.

To read the speech delivered by Juan E. Mendéz at the Bogotá conference, [click here](#).

For more information about the conference, the ICTJ’s work in Colombia, or to learn more about our work, please contact the Center’s Press Relations Officer, Kasia Reterska, at + 1 646 696 4268 or kreterska@ictj.org.

About the ICTJ

The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse. The Center works in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict, as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved.

In order to promote justice, peace, and reconciliation, government officials and nongovernmental advocates are likely to consider a variety of transitional justice approaches including both judicial and nonjudicial responses to human rights crimes. The ICTJ assists in the development of integrated, comprehensive, and localized approaches to transitional justice comprising five key elements: prosecuting perpetrators, documenting and acknowledging violations through non-judicial means such as truth commissions, reforming abusive institutions, providing reparations to victims, and facilitating reconciliation processes.

The Center is committed to building local capacity and generally strengthening the emerging field of transitional justice, and works closely with organizations and experts around the world to do so. By working in the field through local languages, the ICTJ provides comparative information, legal and policy analysis, documentation, and strategic research to justice and truth-seeking institutions, nongovernmental organizations, governments and others.

To find out more about the Center’s work around the world, please visit our website at www.ictj.org.