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Amnesty International to Present 2009 Ginetta Sagan Award to Colombian Woman Who Helps Raise Women's Voices Against Armed Conflict

Standing Up For Women's Rights, Yolanda Becerra Vega Has Endured Physical Attacks and Constant Threats and Intimidation

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(New York) – Yolanda Becerra Vega, who for nearly 30 years has courageously fought to help women in Colombia resist political marginalization and raise their voices against the country's long-running armed conflict, will receive Amnesty International's 2009 Ginetta Sagan Award for Women's and Children's Rights at a national gathering of human rights activists on Friday, March 27, in Boston.

The award will be presented at Amnesty International USA's annual general meeting at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel. The following week, Becerra Vega will meet with members of Congress and speak to public audiences in Washington, DC, under the sponsorship of the Amnesty International USA Ginetta Sagan Fund.

As national director of the 3,500-member Popular Women's Organization, Becerra Vega, 50, has endured physical attacks and constant threats and intimidation by armed groups. Three colleagues were assassinated and two others were "disappeared." In 2007, her home was destroyed and her family threatened.

Her sisters have been threatened and one, a teacher, fled to escape threats of violence. Her sons have gone into hiding. "Sometimes I have had to deny that they are my sons so that they will not be identified with me," said Becerra Vega. "But those responsible cannot silence my voice, nor can they dismantle the organization. This is what keeps me working, denouncing and reporting crimes against human rights, knitting together the fabric of society, mending what the war has destroyed, sowing seeds of life in the cracks of death."

Larry Cox, executive director of Amnesty International USA, said: "Yolanda Becerra Vega's extraordinary commitment to protect women's rights and support women as they raise their voices against the terrible violence in Colombia -- at considerable risk to her

own life -- shows us that individuals can work to change the world and end suffering. Amnesty International USA is proud to honor this amazing woman as we campaign to prevent abuse and exploitation around the globe."

The Ginetta Sagan Award, named for the late Presidential Medal of Freedom winner and longtime Amnesty International activist, recognizes women who devote their lives to ending human rights abuses against women and children. Becerra Vega will receive \$10,000 to advance her work in Colombia.

Through marches, rallies, street theater and other actions, Becerra Vega has campaigned against the violence and impunity that has gripped Colombia for decades. Her organization also offers women economic assistance and training, education, scholarships, health services, assistance to those displaced, legal aid for victims of human rights violations and youth services.

Becerra Vega, who is based in Barrancabermeja, an oil-refining center in the central region where the link between Colombia's security forces and paramilitary groups is well documented, has denounced the left-wing guerrilla forces for human rights abuses, the right-wing paramilitaries for their brutal tactics to impose "order," and the Colombian government for failing to protect civilians against the violence.

"The situation is very difficult because we are refused all rights -- economic, social, civil and political rights," said Becerra Vega. "When we demand our rights and condemn violations of human rights, we are turned into military targets."

In 2007, armed men forced their way into Becerra Vega's home, put a weapon to her head, threatened her family, gave her 48 hours to leave, then destroyed her apartment.

"I had to go to Bucaramanga (the capital of the department) and live as if in exile," she said. "My family has had to live with this situation for many years. I have feared that something might happen to me and I always live in anxiety or uncertainty."

Colombia's internal armed conflict has pitted the security forces and paramilitaries against guerrilla groups for more than 40 years. The conflict has been marked by extraordinary levels of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. Civilians are the principle victims.

Officially, Colombia's paramilitary groups began demobilizing in 2003. But in reality, paramilitary groups, operating under new names, continue to terrorize civilians and commit atrocities with impunity. Attacks on human rights defenders are common.

Amnesty International has documented killings, abductions, and attacks and threats against the Popular Women's Organization, including the 2003 assassination of Esperanza Amaris Miranda, a member of the organization.

Apart from physical attacks, women who are human rights defenders in Colombia are marginalized simply because of their gender. Conservative cultural and religious patterns

persist and the Popular Women's Organization works to help women claim a greater voice in society while refusing to give in to the terror.

"Yolanda Becerra embodies the principle that Ginetta Sagan lived by -- that individual action can change the world. The Popular Women's Organization, which began as a single soup kitchen nearly 40 years ago, offers a variety of life-sustaining services to thousands of women every day and is a powerful voice for peace and justice in Colombia," said Andrea Damesyn Claburn, co-chair of the Ginetta Sagan Fund.

"The Ginetta Sagan Award recognizes and assists women who are working to protect the liberty and lives of women and children in areas where human rights violations are widespread. It recognizes individual accomplishment, but also serves as a beacon of hope to women everywhere who are fighting for human rights. Yolanda Becerra exemplifies the human rights defender who continues her work despite all odds and considerable danger," said Julianne Cartwright Traylor, co-chair of the Ginetta Sagan Fund.

About the Ginetta Sagan Fund

Established as a living memorial to the late human rights activist and prominent Amnesty International USA member Ginetta Sagan, whose lifelong work began with the Italian resistance during World War II, the fund annually bestows an award of \$10,000 to recognize and assist a woman doing effective work to protect the dignity, liberties and lives of women and children in crisis regions where abuse of human rights is widespread. The award recognizes outstanding achievement, often at great personal risk; enhances the recipient's ability to live and work freely; protects her capacity to continue her work, and brings increased international scrutiny to the crisis region or issue for which the recipient works.

Amnesty International is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning grassroots activist organization with more than 2.2 million supporters, activists and volunteers in more than 150 countries campaigning for human rights worldwide. The organization investigates and exposes abuses, educates and mobilizes the public, and works to protect people wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied.

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