

News Service: 061/00
AI INDEX: AMR 41/15/00

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 GMT SATURDAY 1 APRIL (18:01 FRIDAY 31 MARCH MEXICO TIME)

Mexico: wrongfully imprisoned – the price of conscience

Arbitrarily detained and forced under torture to confess to crimes they had not committed -- this is the unacceptable price two Mexican peasant environmentalists have paid for their peaceful commitment to the protection of forests in their native Guerrero state.

“Rodolfo Montiel Flores and Teodoro Cabrera García are prisoners of conscience,” Amnesty International declared today. “Their only crime was to oppose logging operations threatening the environment and livelihood of local peasant communities.”

“The Mexican authorities should take urgent steps to end this injustice and ensure the immediate and unconditional release of both men,” Amnesty International continued.

Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera have languished in prison since their arbitrary arrest by the Mexican army on 2 May 1999 in Pizotla, Guerrero. During the initial days of their detention they were forced to sign self-incriminating confessions and later charged with criminal offences. The federal judge assigned to the case is expected to reach a verdict later this month.

“Their detention -- and the campaign of harassment and threats that preceded it -- was a clear message that their activities, clashing with powerful local economic interests, would not be tolerated,” Amnesty International said.

“At a time when the Mexican government has declared that human rights will be high on its agenda for the 21st century, it is crucial that civil society is allowed to exercise its rights -- including that of peacefully protecting the environment,” the organization added.

Background

Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera -- founders of the *Organización de Campesinos Ecológicos de la Sierra de Petatlán y Coyuca de Catalán*, Peasant Environmentalist Organization of the Mountains of Petatlán y Coyuca de Catalán -- were arbitrarily detained on 2 May 1999 by members of the 40th Infantry Battalion (*40^o Batallón de Infantería*) of the Mexican Army in the community of Pizotla, Guerrero state.

While in the incommunicado custody of the military, the two men were forced to sign self-incriminating confessions. They were subsequently charged with drugs and firearms-related crimes. Since then they have been held in detention in a civilian prison awaiting trial before a federal judge in the 5th District Court of Iguala (*Juzgado Quinto de Distrito de Iguala*), Guerrero state. The court is expected to reach a verdict towards the end of April 2000. Amnesty International believes the charges to be unfounded.

The emergence of the *Organización de Campesinos Ecológicos* was apparently seen by local economic interests which promoted and benefited from the logging operations as a threat. Members of the 40th Infantry Battalion, assigned to counter-insurgency and anti-narcotics operations in the region, also began a campaign of harassment and threats against the group. For example, in July 1998, members of the 40th Infantry Battalion questioned and threatened Rodolfo Montiel, and warned that his family would face reprisals if he reported the incident.

ENDS.../

**For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, on +44
171 413 5562**