



# On the front line

Regional Action Network on Human Rights Defenders

## THE PROJECT

*This two-year Project for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Latin America was set up by Amnesty International (AI) in May 1997 to provide follow-up to the Defenders Conference (Bogota, Colombia, May 1996).*

*Two people based in London work on the Project: one is in charge of coordination and the other is responsible for actions and the Defenders Network. Both work in close collaboration with the Americas Regional Program in the International Secretariat of Amnesty International.*

*In July, Kerrie Howard joined the Project as its new coordinator. As the person responsible for the Project she will work closely with human rights defenders in the region to develop, coordinate and implement protection programs. She can be contacted at the Project*

### Index

<b>THE PROJECT</b> .....	1
<i>The Network</i> .....	1
<i>Accompaniment</i> .....	1
<i>Internships</i> .....	2
<b>GUATEMALA</b> .....	2
<i>Suggested action</i> .....	3
<b>BOLIVIA</b> .....	4
<b>THE REGION</b> .....	5
<b>UN DECLARATION</b> .....	5

*address.*

*Since September last year, I have been in charge of information and actions, including the development and coordination of the Defenders Network and compiling this bulletin. Please contact me if you wish to add materials to future editions of **On the front line**, or if you require more information about the Project and the Network.*

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## The Network

The Defenders Network brings together contacts interested in issues concerning human rights defenders. The Network has two main objectives:

- to distribute and share information about defenders, such as actions produced by other organizations participating in the Network, etc.
- to mobilise Network members to take action on certain AI cases or issues related to human rights defenders.

### Distribution of Information

The Defenders Network receives electronic copies in both English and Spanish of AI's Urgent Actions on human rights defenders in the region. It also receives copies of actions from other organizations such as the Observatory (OMCT/FIDH). Each member of the Network responds to some or all of these appeals according to their own interest and capacity. By receiving copies of these actions, Network members are thus continually updated about urgent defender cases worked on by AI. Please contact me if you wish to receive electronic copies of these actions (e-mail address: [aquintan@amnesty.org](mailto:aquintan@amnesty.org)).

### Defenders Network Actions

The virtual Defenders Network receives electronic appeals regarding AI cases that need immediate response. For example, action by Network members was recently taken to help protect defenders returning to Guatemala, in relation to the killing of Bishop Gerardi (see below); appeals were also requested to protect a threatened Argentinean human rights lawyer. The Defenders Network also receives general information about human rights defenders. These types of actions can be identified by the code AMR HRD, as well as a corresponding AI Index.

## Accompaniment

As part of its integrated accompaniment program - to

establish both direct and indirect ways of maintaining a presence with defenders - the Defenders Project supported a delegation lead by the Guatemalan Catholic Church which travelled to Europe to publicise the report of an inter-diocesan project on Recuperation of the Historical Memory (REMHI) and to seek solidarity to help clarify the killing of Monsig. Gerardi (see below).

Similarly, the Project has worked on media publicity regarding important work carried out by defenders and the risks they face in countries like Guatemala and Colombia. In this respect, we published several press communiqués and adverts protesting the killing of Monsig. Gerardi last April and of Eduardo Umaña, a Colombian human rights lawyer, one month later.

Apart from these initiatives the Project also supports accompaniment programs such as Peace Brigades International (PBI) in Colombia. This non-governmental organization (NGO), which has been working in Latin America for almost two decades, established an accompaniment project for human rights defenders in Colombia in 1994.

The significance and credibility of PBI's work is summed up in the following words:

*«We believe that Peace Brigades International's presence ought to continue to be promoted and supported, and if possible amplified to other regions that need their accompaniment. Their work is imperative in allowing and encouraging human rights defenders to promote spaces for life and liberty in Colombia.»*

Colectivo de Abogados  
"José Alvear Restrepo", Colombia

Each PBI volunteer participating in

the PBI Colombia Project meets a set of criteria and undertakes an intensive training process. In this edition of *On the front line* we are attaching information about PBI training and requesting that it be distributed to all those interested in this area of work.

If you wish to receive further information about PBI or subscribe to their electronic or printed publications, you should send your request to the following address:

PBI Colombia Project  
1b Waterlow Rd  
London N19 5NJ  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: pbi colombia@gn.apc.org.

## Internships

The Defenders Project develops programs for defenders at risk to go to places of safety, these programs provide an opportunity to exchange skills with the host organization or AI section. These programs already exist in Uruguay and Spain.

If you would like information about these internships or if you wish to join one of these programs, please contact the Defenders Project.

## GUATEMALA

### Inter-diocesan Project presented in Europe.

A delegation from the Human Rights Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala, *Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHAG)* travelled to Europe in June and July with the support of the Defenders Project, Amnesty Sections and several other human rights organizations from Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

The delegation travelled to Europe in order to publicise a Guatemalan inter-diocesan project on Recuperation of the Historical Memory (Diocesan Project REMHI) whose report *Guatemala: Never again* is based on a study of more than 55,000 human rights violations committed in Guatemala

during the 36 years of civil conflict that ravaged the country. In addition, the delegation was also calling for continued international pressure to fully clarify the circumstances surrounding the death of the Guatemalan Bishop, Juan Gerardi Conadera, on 26 April 1998, just two days after he launched the presentation of REMHI's report (see previous version of *On the front line*, AMR 01/01/98/s).

While the delegation was in Madrid, the controversy regarding responsibility for the killing of Bishop Gerardi was refuelled, following declarations by the delegation during a press conference on 13 July. These declarations claimed that there was some proof that directly implicated members of the army in the killing of Bishop Gerardi. The Guatemalan Army replied by denying the implication of its military personal in the Bishop's killing and announced that it reserved the right to initiate legal proceedings against anyone who made unfounded accusations against army officials.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Próspero Penados del Barrio confirmed that all the information, including that which suggests the likely involvement of two military officials, had already been handed over to the special commission appointed by the government to investigate the killing of Monsig. Gerardi. The Archbishop also called for an investigation into the Office of the Presidential Chief of Staff in order to verify whether it is connected to the increase in

telephone tapping and mail interception experienced by some members of the church since the Bishop's killing. Over the next few days, various church staff and human rights defenders -including several who participated in Diocesan Project REMHI- received death threats. REMHI's report identified the security forces as those responsible for about three-quarters of all the abuses examined.

## Suggested Action

Current relations between the ODHAG and the army could lead to more intimidation or violence against human rights defenders or other people participating in the process of historical clarification.

**Please write or include in your contacts with the Guatemalan Government the following points.**

, Request that the Guatemalan authorities urgently take all the necessary measures,  
 - to guarantee the security of Guatemalan human rights defenders;  
 - to ensure progress in the investigations regarding Bishop Gerardi's killing and that those responsible are brought to justice.

**In your contacts with representatives of your home Ministry of Foreign/Exterior Relations,**

, Urge that close scrutiny is maintained over the human rights situation in Guatemala; and especially,  
 - over the full implementation of Article 7 of the 1994 Global Human Rights Accord regarding the protection of human rights defenders; and

-over specific measures adopted by the Guatemalan Government to ensure that an exhaustive investigation is conducted into the killing of Monsig. Gerardi and that

*Edgar Gutiérrez, coordinator of the Diocesan Project on Recuperation of the Historical Memory, in London, during a European tour to present the report Guatemala: Never again. "We wish to thank you for your support, which is fundamental for us in these moments, and wish to reiterate how important it is for the Archdiocese of Guatemala, the Catholic Church, other Human Rights Organizations and the Guatemalan people in general, to know that there are individuals, groups, parishes, organizations and communities around the world who show their support for us all."*

those responsible are brought to justice.

, REMHI's report --more than 1000 pages-- as well as relevant summaries in several languages can be obtained from ODHAG's website: <http://www.guateconnect.com/odhagua>

## Feedback from the Network and the Defenders Project

The Project received news of action taken by numerous members of the Network, from Argentina to Costa Rica, Ecuador, etc. In the same spirit, we received the following message from ODHAG:

*"We wish to thank you for your support, which is fundamental for us in these moments, and wish to reiterate how important it is for the Archdiocese of Guatemala, the Catholic Church, other Human Rights Organizations and the Guatemalan people in general, to know that there are individuals, groups, parishes, organizations and communities around the world who show their support for us all."*

ODHAG June 1998

## BOLIVIA

### NGO meeting in la Paz

«Men and women, individually or collectively [...] whatever their philosophical beliefs or social origin, have the inalienable right to defend and promote each and every one of their human rights in the struggle to achieve a world in which all people will be free from "fear and want" (Universal Declaration).

The International Conference on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bogotá, Colombia, May 1996) appealed to human rights defenders in the region to "...continue in their countries the process initiated in Bogotá, Colombia, and to promote similar processes in other regions of the world". As part of AI's activities to follow-up this conference's recommendations, several non-governmental Bolivian human rights organizations were invited to participate in a workshop, on 15 May 1998 in La Paz, based on the *Final Report of the Conference* (AI Index: AMR 01/10/96).

The aim of the workshop was to seek joint ways in which NGOs can consolidate the implementation of the Conference's Final Declaration and Recommendations following the examination of the human rights situation in Bolivia.

After the workshop, a press conference was organized to present

AI's Campaign on the 50th Anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the issue of "impunity and human rights defenders in Latin America".

The workshop, which brought some 20 people from 16 NGOs together, was organized into three working groups, the following are some of their recommendations:

, In the area of legal mechanisms they proposed approaching the Bolivian Government about:

- supporting the approval of the *Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*, which will be considered by the 1998 United Nations (UN) General Assembly;
- institutions created by the Bolivian State which reflect more of a diplomatic need than a genuine policy to promote and protect human rights;
- generating inter-institutional mechanisms to monitor those institutions created by the State and to coordinate activities to defend human rights;
- reactivating the National Meeting for Human Rights (owing to the continuing relevance of its aims), organized during the previous administration by the Human Rights Commission of the Chamber of Deputies.

, In the area of cooperation between human rights organizations, recommendations were made to:

- strengthen existing networks, distribute actions and promote contact between networks through training and communication;
- form a national coordination body among organizations defending human rights;
- organize a national meeting on human rights defenders for 1998 as part of activities for the 50th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*;
- promote the incorporation of organizations into UN, government and other civil society bodies;
- disseminate the *Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* approved by the UN Commission on Human Rights;
- develop a lobbying strategy to ensure that the Bolivian Government ratifies the *Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* to be approved at the next meeting of the UN General Assembly.

Meeting of human rights NGOs, La Paz, Bolivia, 15 May 1998: Waldo Albarracín, president of the Permanent Bolivian Assembly of Human Rights (left) and AI representatives from several countries spoke to the media and human rights defenders attending the meeting.

, In the area of immediate protection for defenders and publicity regarding defending human rights, recommendations were made to:

- concentrate efforts into one body of action;
- take joint action regarding national problems which affect human rights (for example, in the region of El Chapare);
- act jointly to tackle repression against human rights organizations or their members;
- [ensure that] institutional human rights bodies and organs do not restrict their work to theoretical debate on the issue, but take concrete action in favour of human rights defenders;
- disseminate information about human rights and protection of human rights defenders in the alternative media, for example, on NGO radio, church radio, TV, in leaflets, street information, magazines, NGO bulletins, etc.;
- raise funds to pay for notices or adverts in newspapers or on radio.

For more information regarding this workshop, please contact Víctor Vacaflares:

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Humanos de Bolivia  
Ayda. 20 Octubre n° 2019  
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La Paz  
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## THE REGION

, We are requesting members of the Network to continue acting on behalf of human rights defenders in the region, especially in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, as suggested in a number of previous editions of *On the front line*.

In September this year, an Iberia-American conference for ombudsmen will be held in Peru. We would appreciate receiving any information regarding activities that you may be planning to hold in relation to this regional event.

## UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

### Suggested action

, We request that during contacts with government, members of the Network underline the importance that the UN General Assembly adopts during its December 1998 meeting the *Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*, as it was approved by the UN Commission on Human Rights in April this year.

, We request that you send us [the Defenders Project] information and suggestions regarding the *Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* and its relevance to your home country.