



On the front line

Regional Action Network on Human Rights Defenders

To the NGOs

More than 20 Amnesty International Sections currently belong to the Human Rights Defenders Network, as well as a number of individuals and about a dozen NGOs or NGO umbrella organisations in the region. The next steps in the development of the Network will be to continue to expand the membership among national and local NGOs, and to make the Network more proactive. We would like **On the front line** to be a publication used by all members of the Network, not just a forum for news about AI initiatives.

NGOs in the Network can use **On the front line** to share important information about their work with one another; to ask other NGOs to act on urgent cases; to raise questions and discuss issues related to the right to defend human rights; to seek technical or professional help from other groups in the region; to offer suggestions and advice based on experience; to offer practical assistance such as short-term refuge for defenders forced into exile; and to promote a range of

joint initiatives involving human rights defenders. For example, NGO members can disseminate the information provided in this bulletin to other NGOs who are not in the Network, and can use it to bring defenders issues to the attention of the press and the diplomatic community in their countries.

If you would like to include any materials in future issues or would like more information on the Human Rights Defenders Project and the Network, please contact me at the International Secretariat (tel. +44 171 313 5952, e-mail: aquintan@amnesty.org).

Ana Quintanilla
Network Coordinator

Network News

AI Belgium (Francophone) has been carrying out a special project on human rights defenders in Colombia in recent months. They are now increasing their work on this theme, and have confirmed their participation in the Network. You can obtain more information from the Section (tel. +32 2 538 8177, e-mail: aibf@aibf.be).

Several **Mexican NGOs** are now participating in the Network, working closely with **AI Mexico** which will be the contact point for information (tel. +52 5 575 9135,

e-mail: aimexico@laneta.apc.org). We welcome also **AI Spain**, which joins the Network this month.

Virtual Network

hrdefnet@amnesty.org is a new electronic address created for the use of all members in the Defenders Network with access to e-mail. I will be forwarding any general information circulated here to members who are not on e-mail.

Urgent Actions: The members of the Network will start receiving via e-mail all AI Urgent Actions on human rights defenders as soon as they are issued by the UAs Team. The aim is to distribute them to you without delay and, even if you may not have the capacity to act, to keep you fully informed. Please address any queries on this subject to Ana Quintanilla, not to the UAs Team.

New materials

Audiovisual materials: On 24 November, AI released two promotional, music-based videos, with the theme of women and men as human rights defenders. The videos, each of up to two minutes in length link in to the "Get Up Sign Up" initiative of AI's campaign on the 50th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration*. Scripts and tapes can be obtained in Arabic, English, French or Spanish from the IS's Audiovisual Resources Team (tel. +44 171 413 5585, e-mail address: audiovis@amnesty.org).

In the first issue of *On the front line* we informed you of a short programme that the BBC was producing about human rights

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defenders including Elsa Alvarado and Mario Calderón – members of the Colombian NGO CINEP. The film is now available and AI has non commercial, non broadcast rights. Copies can be ordered from the AV Team (see above). For broadcasting rights, please contact Hugh Hamilton Edwards, BBC Program Sales on +44 181 576 2000.

Colombia: A letter was sent to the Network on 18 November 1997 addressed specially to members in countries belonging to the European Union (EU). It recommended new contacts with home governments before the meeting of EU Ministers for Overseas Development scheduled for 25 November, to focus attention on the document the Colombian human rights NGOs sent to their government on 16 June. For more information, please refer to October issue of *On the front line*.

Brazil: An Urgent Action fearing for the safety of several human rights activists, including Giselle Marques de Carvalho Fontoura and Adenildo dos Santos Assunção, was sent to the Network on 6 November (AI Index: AMR 19/28/97).

Mexico: An Urgent Action fearing for the safety of several people including father Samuel Ruiz, Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, was sent to the Network on 6 November (AI Index: AMR 41/103/97). Please see recommended actions below.

Update to WWA

Last month AI published *Amnesty works: Updates to World Wide Appeals, January 1995 to August 1997* (AI Index: NWS 22/07/97). We include here for further action some of the cases on human rights defenders featured in this document.

MEXICO: Bishop Samuel Ruiz
(WWA April 1995/UA Nov. 1997)

In April 1995, AI highlighted the plight of Catholic clergy in the Mexican state of Chiapas who faced increasing harassment and intimidation, such as death threats and physical attacks, because of their work in protecting the human rights of the indigenous population. The sources of such threats are usually local authority officials and wealthy landlords. Among those in particular danger was Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who played a fundamental role in peace negotiations between the Mexican government and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), an armed opposition group. The work of religious human rights defenders in the region remains arduous, but they have not been deterred from their struggle. On 2 August 1996, Bishop Ruiz narrowly escaped injury when there was an attempted attack on the car in which he was travelling; Rafael Vera, the auxiliary bishop of San Cristóbal, has received threats by telephone. Security forces and the local media have embarked on a smear campaign linking members of the Catholic clergy to the activities of the EZLN, even accusing them of selling arms. Foreign missionaries in the area have been expelled. In March 1997, two priests were detained and held incommunicado for four days, during which time they were reportedly tortured.

Recommended Actions: We ask the Network to continue appeals urging the authorities to take immediate measures to guarantee the safety of the Catholic clergy of Chiapas, and to bring to justice those responsible for the threats against them.

Write to: Lic. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, Presidente de la República, Palacio Nacional, 06067 México DF, Mexico.

MEXICO: Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo Rodríguez
(WWA August 1997)

Prisoner of conscience Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo Rodríguez was arrested in November 1993 following the publication of an article in which he criticized human rights violations against civilians and soldiers by members of the armed forces and called for the appointment of an ombudsman for the armed forces. Members of the Brigadier's family and others campaigning for his release have been subjected to assault, harassment and intimidation. In August 1997 AI received reports that the Brigadier's conditions of detention had deteriorated. The authorities have threatened to transfer him away from his family and his laptop computer has been confiscated, along with personal correspondence, including letters of support. The change in his circumstance is believed to be a direct consequence of a recently published article in a national newspaper in which he accused the Minister of Defence of nepotism.

Recommended Actions: Please continue to send appeals calling for the unconditional release of Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo Rodríguez, and for those responsible for the threats and attacks against members of his family and those campaigning on his behalf to be brought to justice.

Write to: Lic. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, Presidente de la República, Palacio Nacional, 06067 México D.F., Mexico.

COLOMBIA: Members of the Civic Human Rights Committee of the Department of Meta
(WWA July 1995)

The "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution of members of the Civic Human Rights Committee of the Department of Meta forced the closure of its headquarters in Villavicencio in April 1995. AI issued an appeal to the Colombian authorities to ensure the safety of all

those working for the Committee – however, the authorities made no real effort to investigate the source of the constant threats and harassment. Perhaps if they had done so, then the killing of Josué Giraldo Cardona, the President of the Committee, could have been prevented.

Josué Giraldo was shot dead outside his home on 13 October 1996. He had received numerous death threats, both as a result of his work with the Committee and because of his political activism. His killing renewed fears for the safety of other members of the Committee, many of whom have also received death threats. The murder of Josué Giraldo renewed the international community's demands for the protection of human rights in Colombia. Following the killing, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a resolution requiring the Colombian Government to protect all members of the Meta Civic Committee, to investigate the murder of Josué Giraldo and other acts against members of the Meta Civic Committee, and to bring those responsible to justice. Although the Colombian Government has condemned the killing of Josué Giraldo and opened an investigation, little progress has been made in identifying those responsible.

Recommended Actions: Please send appeals to the Colombian authorities, urging them to complete their investigations into the death of Josué Giraldo and bring those found responsible to justice. Also seek assurances that measures deemed appropriate by members of the Meta Civic Committee are taken to guarantee their safety.

Write to: Ernesto Samper Pizano, Presidente de la República, Palacio de Nariño, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia.

You could also **write to your own government,** asking how it will monitor efforts by the Colombian authorities to ensure full

investigations into the killing of Josué Giraldo and the implementation of the recommendations made by the Colombian human rights NGOs to their government on 16 June 1997 to guarantee the safety of human rights workers.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC:

Dr Narciso González
(WWA May 1996)

Dr Narciso González, a university lecturer, journalist and father of four, “disappeared” on 26 May 1994.

According to eye-witness accounts, he was forced into an official vehicle after leaving a cinema in Santo Domingo. It is alleged that members of the J-2 military base took him to the armed forces' secretariat, and that he was tortured there before being taken to a police station. It is feared that Dr Narciso González may have died while being transported from there to the National Police Palace.

Dr González' whereabouts remain unknown.

In October 1996, the authorities reopened the investigation into his “disappearance” after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States gave the government 30 days to clarify his fate. The Secretary of State for the Armed Forces and more than 20 other high-ranking army officers were dismissed after being implicated in the case. However, investigations have not yet been concluded and no one has yet been brought to justice.

Recommended Actions: Please write to the President of the Dominican Republic, welcoming the re-opening of the investigation into the “disappearance” of Dr Narciso González and calling for those responsible to be brought to justice. Send letters to: Leonel Fernández Reyna, Presidente de la República, Palacio Nacional, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

MEXICO

Rosario Ibarra, two decades working for human rights

Rosario Ibarra is a tireless human rights defender and president of the Mexican *Comité Eureka*. This was formed 20 years ago, in 16 April 1977, during a meeting of delegates from organizations of relatives of the “disappeared” in Monterrey, state of Nuevo León. Rosario Ibarra's son “disappeared” after being detained by members of the Nuevo León State Judicial Police in April 1975. He remains “disappeared” to this date. Along the years, Rosario Ibarra and the *Comité Eureka* have worked closely with AI in defence of the “disappeared”. At the end of October, she visited several AI offices in Europe. Here we reproduce part of the talk she gave to staff and volunteers at the IS and the interview that followed.

“In 1975, the Mexican government kidnapped and made “disappear” one of my children, Jesús Piedras. I searched for him on my own, with my husband, with my family... The government didn't respond. My son remained “disappeared”, I never saw him again. But in the course of this fruitless search I realized that there were many families like ours, many mothers searching for their children... It was part of a systematic reign of terror practised by the Mexican government against opponents amongst the population. It was then that I thought of forming the Committee to defend the “disappeared”. And we did so in April 1977 in Monterrey, and called it Comité Pro Defensa de Presos, Perseguidos, Desaparecidos y Exiliados Políticos, Committee for the Defence of Prisoners and Persecuted, Imprisoned, Exiled or Missing Persons. Our fight through the years had success: amnesties, the return of the exiles, the release of more than 1.500 prisoners held in prison... By then we added the Greek word Eureka, that means “I have discovered, I have

found”, because we had found 148 “disappeared”. And everybody started referring to us as Comité Eureka...

“And we keep working: Even after succeeding in the release of some prisoners, having avoided some instances of torture, many positive things... more than 500 people remain “disappeared”, and the government has started this practice again: ... we have recently received new reports of “disappearances”.

To a question on how they can change the attitude of the government, she responds: “It depends on the strength that we can muster inside and outside Mexico. For instance, there was an incident where a young Mexican man had “disappeared”. I had been invited to attend an AI meeting in San Francisco, USA, ... and asked them to start an Urgent Action. And both this and the work carried out in Mexico resulted in the young man’s reappearance... He was given back his life. That is one way; the other is to generate a lot of pressure on the public in the country and outside... The Mexican government is very sensitive to international opinion.”

Asked to describe her opinion of what constitutes human rights, she replies: “... Everything that means life. From the moment of birth, a human being has a right to life, education, adequate food..., the right to work... Unfortunately, many people, including the Mexican government, don’t understand them and think that human rights are for them alone. Luckily, they cannot modify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and although compliance can’t be forced on governments we can expose them to the world if they fail to uphold these fundamental rights.

“How can human rights defenders be protected? I think by publicizing their life

Mexico D.F., 28 August 1997: Rosario Ibarra (second on the right) and other mothers of the “disappeared” from the Comité Eureka celebrate the 20th anniversary of their first hunger strike.

and work. I received death threats. In 1982 ... I was the first female candidate to the presidency of the Republic. I agreed to it because it would publicize the fight for the “disappeared” ... My CV said I was the mother of a “disappeared”. That was very important as it would become known that there were “disappearances” in Mexico... During that period my husband received 40 letters with death threats; as did everybody else in my family... I appealed to Amnesty International ... and its Secretary General wrote to the Mexican government. And the death threats ceased. I think this can be done for all human rights defenders: To give publicity to their activities ... and make public the threats they receive.

“And what can be done [against abuses]? We need to be organized, all mothers of the “disappeared” fighting against the government that violates human rights. My son “disappeared” 22 years ago and I haven’t stopped fighting for a single day. And I’m not going to.”

Recommended Actions

, To find out more about the *Comité Eureka* please contact Rosario Ibarra, Mazatlán 5, Edificio T, nº1, Colonia Condesa, México DF, Mexico. Tel/Fax +525 211 0295.

, To continue actions as recommended in the following documents sent to the Network: *Central America and Mexico: Human Rights Defenders - 10 December, Human Rights Day Action* (AI Index: AMR 02/02/96, Nov. 1996); *Central America and Mexico: Human Rights Defenders on the Front Line* (AMR 02/01/96) and *Update* (AMR 02/04/96, Dec. 1996); *Arbitrary Expulsion of international human rights monitors* (AMR 41/29/97) and internal action (AMR 41/26/97/s, April 1997); *Silencing dissent: The imprisonment of Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo Rodríguez* (AMR 41/31/97, May 97).

, A new paper on “disappearances” in Mexico (AMR 41/105/97) including information on the *Comité Eureka* is being finalized and will be sent to you in the near future.