

## Human Rights Defenders: Update

### Human Rights Defenders on the Front Line

#### Central America and Mexico

#### Update

The report *Central America and Mexico: Human Rights Defenders on the Front Line* (AI Index AMR 02/01/96) includes cases dating from the period up to the beginning of October 1996. However, Amnesty International has continued to receive reports of serious threats and attacks on human rights defenders in Central America and Mexico, together with compelling evidence of the involvement or complicity of the authorities or security force agents and of the continued impunity that the perpetrators of human rights violations enjoy.

This update includes examples of cases which have occurred since that date or about which information has only recently been received.

#### **EL SALVADOR**

Staff members of the Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights "Madeleine Lagadec" in San Salvador have been the object of threats. On 13 August 1996, staff found an anonymous note saying "...so prepare yourselves because we're going to kill you".

On 27 September, Eliezar Ambelis, a human rights promotor at the Centre, received a death threat saying "those talks you give in the communities are really bugging us... Don't poke your nose in things that don't concern you ...we're not going to put up with it after today ... You'd better be very careful, you idiot .. Stop this work because it will only bring you danger". On 8 October two masked individuals tried to abduct him on the road from Santa Clara to the community of El Rosario, department of San Vicente. According to the information received, the two masked men seized Eliezar Ambelis in the middle of the road, and attempted to blindfold him and force him into a car. However, he managed to escape. The attackers shot at him as he ran away but none of the bullets reached him.

An hour after the abduction attempt, the Centre's office in San Salvador received a threatening telephone call from an individual saying: "I want you to know that this office has to disappear, so watch out. We've got the guy from Santa Clara. Pray for him". The person who made the call is believed to have been unaware that Eliezar Ambelis had managed to escape from his captors.

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That same night, unknown individuals left a threatening note on the door of the Centre's office saying: "... look out, your day will come soon". On 12 October the Centre's offices in Santa Ana were entered illegally and documents, case information and other materials were taken. It is believed that these threats may be related to the work the Centre has done to promote the right to vote and to its campaign against the death penalty.

The Human Rights Procurator stated publicly in mid-November that she had received several death threats from unknown individuals. Dr Victoria Velásquez de Avilés revealed that the threats, which had begun in May 1995, had intensified recently and now included threats against her family; they threatened to rape and kill her four daughters. The threats have coincided with public criticism by government officials of her work at the head of the institution, created by the peace accords. The Procurator has condemned the actions of illegal armed groups which continue to carry out killings reminiscent of the "death squads" which operated during the civil war. She does not discount the possibility that there are links between these groups and the National Civilian Police. The work of the Procurator has been recognized internationally and on 19 November she received an award from the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development in Canada for "her work to advance the consolidation of the rule of law in El Salvador" and "the independence with which she carries out her work in defence of human rights".

### GUATEMALA

While the Guatemalan government has announced progress in the negotiations forming part of the peace process, due to conclude on 29 December of this year, Amnesty International has continued to document cases of attacks and threats against Guatemalan human rights defenders. Despite the commitment of the authorities to take special measures to protect defenders and their work, Amnesty International has not received any information to indicate that the government has taken any concrete initiatives in this respect; neither has progress been reported in investigations into practically any of the cases of threats, intimidation and human rights violations mentioned in the report.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International has received information about the raid on Sunday 13 October on the Centre for Legal Action for Human Rights (CALDH), a non-governmental organization dedicated to the protection and defence of human rights. According to reports, those who carried out the burglary broke into the CALDH offices and took away computer equipment. CALDH staff believe that members of the security forces may have been involved in the burglary in view of several factors, such as the fact that the files were searched and that a note was left on the meeting table saying, "the time has not yet come". Moreover, CALDH staff were in Washington for a session of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) concerning cases of human rights violations in Guatemala.

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Amnesty International is concerned that this latest act of intimidation is not an isolated incident. The United Nations Mission for the verification of human rights and compliance with the commitments of the Global Human Rights Accord (MINUGUA) confirmed in 1995 that the vehicles used during surveillance operations against the staff and office of CALDH were registered as belonging to the Presidential Chief of Staff <sup>1</sup>.

In another case, after surviving two attempts on his life and repeated death threats, trade unionist Víctor Hugo Durán Guerra was forced to leave Guatemala on 19 September 1996. In one of the attacks, two men on a motorcycle shot at Víctor Hugo Durán, Secretary General of the “22 February” General Workers’ Union of Guatemala, as he was travelling from Guatemala City to Villanueva, department of Guatemala, on 5 September. Although the bullets went through his luggage and broke one of the windows of his car, Víctor Durán was not hurt in the attack. Moreover, Amnesty International has expressed concern for the safety of another three members of this trade union who have received several death threats. The organization believes that Víctor Durán and the other trade unionists are being threatened in connection with their legitimate activities as trade unionists and that members of the security forces may be involved in the attacks.

## **HONDURAS**

The organization has continued to receive reports of death threats and harassment against non-governmental human rights defenders and members of the office of the National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights.

On 29 February 1996, a male caller threatened all members of COFADEH by telephone, saying: “Bitches, we are from Squad 3-16, you’re going to die ...”. This threat is believed to be linked to the fact that COFADEH is supporting the case of two former officers of the now disbanded National Investigations Directorate (DNI - the investigative branch of the Public Security Force, FSP) who complained formally that they were receiving death threats. These officers are in a position to testify about the activities of the DNI in connection with widespread human rights violations during the 1980s. In a four week period in June and July, according to reports from non-governmental human rights organizations in Honduras, at least five former DNI officers were killed in circumstances suggesting they were victims of extrajudicial executions.

In July 1996, the National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights and several of his staff were threatened and followed. The Commissioner, Leo Valladares, received death

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<sup>1</sup>Paragraph 132, Third Report of the Director of the United Nations Mission for the verification of human rights and compliance with the Global Human Rights Accord in Guatemala, November 1995.

threats by telephone and a man on a motorcycle was seen circling his home repeatedly.

## MEXICO

Amnesty International is seriously alarmed at the escalation in human rights violations against human rights defenders and other activists. The organization has received information on dozens of new cases since the report was written. Amnesty International fears that unless the authorities take immediate and effective measures to halt these abuses the country could be on the brink of a grave human rights crisis. The new pattern of human rights violations reported to the organization since October includes abductions followed by “disappearance”, and the torture of human rights and other activists. The examples which follow represent the tip of the iceberg of an increasingly worrying situation regarding human rights defenders in Mexico.

Javier López Montoya, administrator of the Coordination Group of Non-Governmental Organizations for Peace (CONPAZ), his wife Eva Lara and their two small children, were “disappeared” for 48 hours from the evening of 5 November, when a group of unidentified men, apparently linked to the security forces, abducted them in Chapa del Corzo, Chiapas. Their captors ill-treated and beat the members of the family and threatened to kill them if Javier López continued with his peace activities. On 4 and 6 November leaders of CONPAZ, whose offices had been raided on 5 November by unidentified individuals, received several telephone calls in which a number of members of the organization and other NGOs affiliated to it were threatened. According to the information received, the speaker said on one occasion: “We’ve already got one of you, the rest are going to die one by one, and now we mean business”. Threats against CONPAZ have continued since the abduction and torture of Javier López Montoya and his family.

Other human rights defenders and activists who were interrogated under torture following their abduction by individuals believed to be linked to the security forces include: Felipe Sánchez Rojas, chairperson of the Centre for Indigenous Regional Development in Oaxaca, state of Oaxaca, who “disappeared” between 29 October and 2 November; Manuel Ramírez Santiago, chairperson of the Committee for the Defence of People’s Rights, and Fermín Oseguera Santiago, chairperson of the Tablajeros Union A.C., both from Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, who “disappeared” between 22 October and 1 November. All were released following an intense national and international campaign on their behalf.

Similar cases have been documented in Mexico City. On 4 November, Ruth Yudit Orozco, a student activist and human rights defender at the Mexican Autonomous University (UNAM), was abducted in Mexico City as she made her way to a class. It was the second time she had been abducted in one month. On the second occasion, two unidentified men placed a gun in her mouth, tied her hands and feet and gagged her while threatening her and warning her repeatedly that she was being followed. She was released the same day. On 2 October 1996 she had been abducted in Mexico City by two unidentified men who took her to a secret detention centre. Ruth Orozco was interrogated under torture about her student activism. The torture she

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was subjected to included beatings, electric shocks and threats against members of her family.

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