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INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL APPEALS ON BEHALF OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

Marking international human rights day, Amnesty International today published a report which highlights the dangers, abuses and difficulties facing those dedicated to the defence and promotion of human rights in Central America and Mexico.

In its report *Human Rights Defenders on the Front Line*, Amnesty International surveys the situation in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico and concludes that there is a persistent pattern of intimidation and persecution of defenders in the region, including in those countries undergoing peace processes and political transitions.

“Governments renege all too frequently on two of their most important obligations, the promotion and protection of human rights. Furthermore, they attack those who carry out these activities, or allow others to attack them with impunity,” the human rights organization said.

“Solidarity and grassroots action to promote human rights values is often the only tool civil society has to protect these rights. Members of these organizations, or isolated individuals, should be protected, not targeted.”

A wide range of non-governmental organizations, individuals and associations - trade unions, popular and religious organizations, etc - are part of the struggle for the defence of human rights. Defenders include lawyers, journalists, peasant leaders, trade unionists, students, relatives of victims and many others who denounce and investigate violations, support and protect the victims, campaign for an end to impunity, promote human rights education and mobilize their communities by means of campaigns to end violations.

In Mexico, Amnesty International has observed a new, alarming and increasing pattern of abuses against human rights defenders which has meant that practically all organizations dedicated to this task have lately suffered intimidation, threats and even attacks because of their work. In recent months, some members of these organizations have been targets of abduction followed by torture by individuals believed to be linked to the security forces.

Even prominent members of the clergy involved in human rights defence have been threatened and attacked. On 29 June 1995, gunmen opened fire on Catholic bishop Arturo Lona Reyes, a well-known human rights defender and chairperson of the Tepeyac Human Rights Centre in Tehuantepec, state of Oaxaca.

Samuel Ruiz, also a Catholic bishop, has also been persecuted because of his work on behalf of indigenous peasants in the state of Chiapas.

In Honduras, many people involved directly or indirectly in the investigation of serious human rights violations committed in the past, both as representatives of civil society and of the investigative apparatus of the state, are constant targets of threats intimidation and attacks by members of the security forces.

Members of the judiciary, such as the judges María Antonieta Mendoza de Castro and Roy Medina, have received death threats as a result of their role in bringing cases against members of the military. Prosecution lawyers in trials of military personnel, such as Linda Lizzy Rivera, the prosecuting lawyer in the trial of two officers eventually sentenced for the rape and murder of a 16-year old, have been the target of threats or attacks. Even the Commissioner for Human Rights, Leo Valladares, has received anonymous telephone calls, obliging him to take special measures to protect members of his family.

In Guatemala, although there is currently no deliberate government policy of repression, information gathered by Amnesty International indicates that those working to end impunity - judges, lawyers, journalists, members of human rights organizations - are frequent victims of torture, extrajudicial executions, abductions and death threats by agents linked to the state's security forces.

According to the United Nations Independent Expert for Guatemala, Monica Pinto, the same situation is faced by "all organized sectors of civil society and those who support the peace process in general." Amnesty International maintains that these human rights violations are carried out with the consent or complicity of certain public officials.

Practically all those involved in the investigation of the murder in 1990 of anthropologist Myrna Mack have been threatened or attacked in some way: the police commissioner in charge of the investigation was murdered in 1991; judge María Eugenia Villaseñor, author of a book critical of the way the judiciary has handled the case, has received repeated threats and one of the police officers responsible for her protection was abducted and beaten. In 1996, those suspected of masterminding the killing were released on bail.

In El Salvador, despite a decrease in the scale of human rights violations since the end of the civil conflict, people active in the defence of human rights continue to be subjected to threats, attacks and intimidation.

The premises of the Salvadorean Women's Movement, the Committee of Relatives of Victims of Human Rights Violations and FUNDASIDA, an organization dedicated to the care of those affected by AIDS, have been repeatedly raided and the organizations' members have often been threatened. The most dramatic incident was the May 1994 killing of Alexander Rodas Abarca, a guard at the offices of the Salvadorean Women's Movement.

In 1995, the director of the Human Rights Institute of the University of Central America, Benjamin Cuellar, was also attacked by unknown individuals immediately after taking part in an event commemorating the killing of six Jesuit priests by the security forces in 1989.

Amnesty International highlights the emergence of groups dedicated to intimidation and the persistence of “death squads”. Among the most notorious is the Roberto D’Aubuisson Nationalist Force, FURODA, whose first public statement in June 1996 threatened fifteen people with death, including several members of the Catholic church and the National Human Rights Procurator, Victoria Marina Velásquez.

In view of this situation, Amnesty International is calling on governments of the region explicitly to acknowledge the legitimacy and value of the work of human rights defenders and to adopt administrative and legal measures to prevent any restrictions on this work.

The human rights organization is also urging greater cooperation and support by governments for United Nations staff involved in human rights monitoring in those countries where the UN has missions.

Amnesty International also recommends that the Organization of American States (OAS) initiate the drafting of an Inter-American Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders at the next session of its General Assembly, and that it include a chapter on human rights defenders in its annual report.

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For more information:

Amnesty International, *Central America and Mexico: Human Rights Defenders on the Front Line*
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