

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 18/005/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 215
2 December 2002

Embargo Date: 2 December 2002 01:00 GMT

Bolivia: Will the new government defend human rights defenders?

As President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada approaches his fourth month in office, Amnesty International today urged the new Bolivian government to make the protection of human rights defenders a priority.

In a new report published today, the organization details 13 cases of human rights defenders who have been victimised because of their legitimate human rights work. These include activists, lawyers, members of the clergy and personnel of the Ombudsperson's Office working on a range of issues including impunity for past human rights violations, land-related disputes and indigenous rights.

The cases highlight a disturbing pattern of inaction on the part of the authorities, which has allowed those responsible for threats, intimidation and attacks against human rights defenders to enjoy complete impunity, and has left the victims increasingly vulnerable.

The majority of the cases described in the report took place under previous administrations. However, under international law the government of President Sánchez de Lozada has full responsibility to ensure they are thoroughly and impartially investigated, and that those responsible are brought to justice.

———Amnesty International calls the administration of President Sánchez de Lozada to publicly commit to the protection of human rights and of those engaged in their defence.

"The work of human rights defenders is internationally acknowledged to be a key element in ensuring the rule of law and the protection of basic rights and liberties," Amnesty International said. "As such, it must enjoy the full support of the state and its institutions," the organization added.

Amnesty International's recommendations to the Bolivian government include:

- ensuring the cooperation of state officials at all levels with human rights organizations;
- ensuring thorough and impartial investigations into abuses against human rights defenders; bringing those responsible to justice, and providing adequate compensation for the victims;
- ensuring that members of the security forces under investigation for human rights violations are suspended from active service;
- adopting a comprehensive protection programme for human rights defenders and witnesses of human rights violations.

Background

The right to defend human rights is protected by a series of international standards and principles. On 9 December 1998, on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*.

The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders sets out a series of principles based on legal human rights standards enshrined in international law and adopted by all member states of the United Nations -- including Bolivia -- through their participation in the UN's General Assembly. To encourage compliance, the 1999 sessions of the UN Human Rights Commission asked all states to implement the Declaration and to provide information about their efforts to do so. In addition, the Commission urged all UN human rights bodies and mechanisms to take the provisions of the Declaration into account in their work. The UN Secretary General appointed a special representative on human rights defenders, with a remit to supervise, document and intervene on behalf of defenders in danger.

The Declaration sets out the rights of human rights defenders, indicating the freedoms and activities that are fundamentally important to their work, including the right to know, seek, obtain and receive information on human rights and fundamental freedoms; the right to participate in peaceful activities against violations of these rights; the right to criticize and denounce non-compliance by governments of human rights standards and to formulate proposals to improve the situation. On referring to the right to act collectively, the Declaration pays special attention to the right to association and the right to act with others to protect human rights. The Declaration demands that states act with regard to these rights and freedoms to ensure that human rights defenders can carry out their work in freedom, without interference and without fear of threats, reprisals or discrimination.

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