

PUBLIC

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UA 232/05 Fear for safety/Death threats

ECUADOR Lina Maria Espinoza Villegas (f), human rights defender, Colombian national

Colombian human rights defender Lina María Espinoza Villegas, who has been helping communities involved in protests against oil companies operating in Ecuador's Northern Amazon region, has been receiving anonymous telephone death threats. Amnesty International fears that her life may be in danger.

Lina Espinoza Villegas is a missionary working in the *Vicariato Apostólico* (Catholic church administrative region) of the city of El Coca, Orellana Province. Between 24 and 26 August, she reportedly received several calls on her mobile phone from a man who warned her, *Si se está cuidando, cuídese mucho* (If you are taking care of yourself, take good care of yourself); *Usted dónde está? Dónde están sus hijos?* (Where are you? Where are your sons?); *Si usted está bien ahora, después no va [a] estar tan bien* (If you are alright now, later you will not be so well). Two other threats were left on her voicemail. In the first, left on 27 August, the caller said: *Escorpión rojo a escorpión negro: dónde le pongo la carga?* (Red scorpion to black scorpion: where do I unload? [a slang expression meaning "fire a gun"]). The second, recorded on 28 August, was the sound of gunshots. María Espinoza Villegas filed a complaint about the death threats with the Public Ministry in the capital, Quito, but no investigation is known to have begun.

These threats appear to be linked to her work providing training to peasants and indigenous people on human rights and how to protect those rights in their campaign against oil companies' activities in Orellana Province. Orellana and the neighbouring province of Sucumbios provide much of Ecuador's oil, but they are among the poorest provinces in the country. In mid-August, 10 days of strikes and demonstrations began in Orellana and Sucumbios provinces. Local communities were demanding that a greater proportion of oil revenues be spent on building roads, schools and hospitals in the areas where the transnational oil companies are operating. During the protests, María Espinoza Villegas visited these communities to tell the inhabitants of their rights, and document allegations of human rights violations by the police and the armed forces in Orellana. María Espinoza Villegas also took part as an observer in the negotiations between the communities and the authorities that finally resulted in an agreement that was signed on 25 August.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Ecuadorian authorities have granted oil-drilling concessions to a number of transnational oil companies. In the last few years, Amnesty International has received several reports of death threats and other intimidation of human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations who are critical of the authorities, including those who oppose the government's oil extraction policies and support indigenous peoples' proposals for alternative development projects (For more information, see UA 147/05, AMR 28/013/2005, 1 June 2005 and follow-ups; UA 156/04, AMR 28/014/2004, 26 April 2004; UA 36/04, AMR 28/002/2004, 3 February 2004) Amnesty International has called upon the authorities to investigate these threats and bring those responsible to justice, but to date nobody has been charged.

Ecuador is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS). In June 2004, the OAS General Assembly adopted a resolution reiterating its support for the work of human rights defenders and recognizing their valuable contribution to the promotion, observance, and protection of fundamental rights and freedoms in the Americas, and to the representation and defense of individuals, minorities, and other groups whose rights are threatened or violated.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of Lina María Espinoza Villegas, who has been receiving anonymous telephone death threats;
- asking the authorities to order a prompt and effective investigation into the death threats;
- demanding that the findings are made public and those responsible are brought to justice;
- urging the authorities to guarantee the safety of Lina María Espinoza Villegas according to her wishes;
- urging the government to adhere to its obligations regarding the protection of human rights defenders, as laid out in the UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration, and the Organisation of American States resolution on human rights defenders of June 2004.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of the Interior

Dr. Mauricio Gándara Gallegos
Ministro de Gobierno, Policía,
Justicia, Cultos y Municipalidades
Ministerio de Gobierno y Policía
Benalcázar y Espejo
Quito, Ecuador

Fax: + 593 2 258 1030 (If someone answers, please ask: "Tono de fax, por favor")

Salutation: Dear Minister/Señor Ministro

Acting Attorney General

Dra. Cecilia Armas Tobar
Ministra Fiscal Subrogante
Fiscalía General del Estado
Av. Eloy Alfaro N°32-240 y República
Quito, Ecuador

Fax: + 593 2 255 8565 (If someone answers, please ask: "Tono de fax, por favor")

Salutation: Dear Acting Attorney General/Sra. Ministra Fiscal Subrogante

COPIES TO:

Human Rights Organizations

Comisión Ecuémica de Derechos Humanos (CEDHU)
Carlos Ibarra 176 y 10 de Agosto
Edif. Yuraj Pirca, 9no. piso
Quito, Ecuador

Fax: + 593 2 258 9272 (If someone answers say: 'tono de fax, por favor')

Centro de Documentación en Derechos Humanos
"Segundo Montes Mozo SJ" CSMM
Nicolás Jiménez, E 4, 223, piso 5 y Av. 12 de Octubre, dep. E- 3
Quito, ECUADOR

Fax: + 593 2 254 3845 (If someone answers say: 'tono de fax, por favor')

and to diplomatic representatives of Peru accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 20 October 2005.