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Mexico: Local communities face political violence in the run-up to elections

Politically motivated violence and intimidation of individuals and local communities must stop, Amnesty International said today as political pressure intensifies in the run-up to the elections of 2 July.

"Local communities are especially bearing the brunt of the ruling party's political machine," the organization added.

Methods used by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to pressurize the electorate range from threats to jobs and state funding for local communities, to violent intimidation, including death threats.

In at least one case, this appears to have resulted in the death of a community member who had publicly criticized a PRI candidate at a meeting in the indigenous Mixe municipality of Mixistlán de la Reforma in Oaxaca state. Artemio Antonio Pérez was reportedly beaten and arrested on 14 June 2000 after expressing criticism of the PRI and arguing that he had the right to express his opinion.

On 16 June 2000 his dead body -- apparently bearing signs of torture -- was returned to his family by the police, who claimed he had hung himself in his cell. Despite an official complaint, the authorities have so far failed to take effective steps to establish the circumstances, manner and cause of his death.

"Acts of political violence and intimidation often go unreported as long experience has taught victims that those responsible will inevitably remain free to take reprisals," Amnesty International said.

"Elections in Mexico have long been a catalyst for political violence, particularly where political bosses exercise power through a mixture of patronage and threats," the organization continued.

"It is now time for the Mexican authorities to break with this tradition and to take decisive action to protect the rights of all in the run-up and aftermath of the elections."

Such action would be in keeping with international commitments undertaken by Mexico by signing up to international human rights conventions, such as the Interamerican Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrine among others the rights to life, physical integrity, freedom of expression and free and universal suffrage.

Background

Intimidation, threats and killings of local political activists from the opposition and the ruling party -- which has been in power for over 70 years -- have been a feature of Mexican politics for over a century.

In recent years national and international pressure has led the Mexican authorities to introduce a number of important reforms to improve the openness and legitimacy of the electoral processes, including establishing the *Instituto Federal Electoral* (IFE), Federal Electoral Institute. Another step has been to allow the presence of national and international election monitors to try and assess and ensure the fairness of elections. These monitors have also played an important role in reducing political violence during elections and bringing to light human rights violations surrounding elections. However, it remains clear that in many communities, away from the direct scrutiny of independent election monitors, the practices of political intimidation and violence continue.

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