

PUBLIC

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1 March 2007

UA 49/07 **Fear for safety**

GUATEMALA **Leonardo Ramírez (m), President of the New San José las Lágrimas Association (Asociación Nueva San José las Lágrimas) and member of the Committee of Peasant Unity (Comité de Unidad Campesina – CUC)**
Other members of the New San José las Lágrimas Association

Killed: Vicente Ramírez López (m), member of the New San José las Lágrimas Association and the CUC

Peasants' rights activist Leonardo Ramírez, who has been working on behalf of peasant farmers threatened with eviction, has been told of a plot to kill him. Another activist, Vicente Ramírez López, was killed on 13 February. Leonardo Ramírez is in grave danger.

Leonardo Ramírez is the President of the New San José las Lágrimas Association, an organization set up by rural workers who have been living on the land of the San José las Lágrimas farm, in Esquipulas, Chiquimula Department. The community of around 125 families occupied the land on 29 June 2006, protesting that the government had failed to give a clear decision on who had the rights to the tenancy of the farm, despite several years of legal proceedings. The army are occupying another part of the farm, where there is allegedly a mass grave of people killed by the armed forces during the internal armed conflict (1960-1996).

Vicente Ramírez López and four other members of the Association were attacked on the farm by four armed men on 13 February. The four men reportedly fired at them, killing Vicente Ramírez. The rural workers managed to catch two of the gunmen, who claimed the army had sent them, and handed them over to the police. The two men were later imprisoned, but have reportedly since been freed.

Four days earlier, on 9 February, several armed men had reportedly arrived at Leonardo Ramírez's house on the San José las Lágrimas farm. One went into the house to ask Leonardo's wife where he was, while the others apparently remained hidden in bushes 500 metres away.

On 19 February, an acquaintance of Leonardo Ramírez from another community reportedly told him that he should be careful, as he had heard that there were people tracking him who could kill him.

On 24 February a relative of his who was working in a field was approached by a man who asked where Leonardo Ramírez lived. The relative said he did not know, and the man (known locally as someone with links to the army) reportedly told him that anyone who killed Leonardo Ramírez would receive 500 quetzales (US\$65) for Ramírez's head.

The rural workers' right to occupy the farmland is hotly disputed by the purported landowner. On 15 February the army and police gathered outside the farm to evict them, and were only prevented at the last minute when the rural workers obtained a court order. Legal proceedings are continuing, and an eviction could take place over the next months.

On 6 January three houses in the hamlet of El Chapulín, belonging to members of the New San José las Lágrimas Association, were burnt down. The houses, which are several hours' walk from the San José las Lágrimas farm, were empty at the time.

Other Association members have been killed in the past few months. On 14 December Matías Hernández, a member of the Association's Executive Board, was shot dead as he worked in his field.

Other associations of peasant farmers have also been targeted recently. On 6 February Israel Carías Ortiz, a peasant farmer living in the community of Los Achiotes, in the neighbouring Department of Zacapa, was shot dead with his two children, aged nine and 10. He had been involved in an attempt to recover land which allegedly belonged to the State but had been taken over by local landowners.

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

- expressing grave concern for the safety of Leonardo Ramírez and other members of the New San José las Lágrimas Association;
- urging the authorities to order an immediate and thorough investigation into the intimidation of Leonardo Ramírez, and into the 13 February killing of Vicente Ramírez, and to bring those responsible to justice;
- reminding the authorities of their obligations to recognize the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders and their right to carry out their activities without any restrictions or fear of reprisals, as set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties.

APPEALS TO:

Attorney General and Head of the Public Prosecutor's office

Lic. Juan Luis Florido

Fiscal General de la República y Jefe del Ministerio Público

Edificio Ministerio Público

15 Avenida 15-16, Zona 1, Barrio Gerona, 8vo. Nivel, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: +502 2411 9124

+502 2411 9326

Salutation: Dear Attorney General/Estimado Sr. Fiscal General

Minister of Interior

Ing. Carlos Roberto Vielmann Montes

Ministro de Gobernación

6a. Avenida 13-71, Zona 1,

Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Fax: +502 2413 8658

Salutation: Dear Minister/Estimado Sr. Ministro

COPIES TO:

Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC)

31 Avenida A 14-46, Zona 7, Ciudad de Plata 2

Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Fax: +502 2434 9500 (if a voice answers, say "tono de fax, por favor")

and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 12 April 2007.