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Guatemala: Presidential candidates must resolve legacy of conflict

In a letter made public today, in the run up to Guatemala's presidential elections on 9 September, Amnesty International urged Presidential candidates to call for an end to the current political violence and to resolve the dark legacy of the internal armed conflict by tackling endemic impunity in the country.

"The failure to hold to account those responsible for the thousands of killings, rape, torture and disappearances during Guatemala's 36-year-long conflict has caused the present proliferation of clandestine groups who operate with absolute impunity causing an endless cycle of human rights abuses. Dealing with the past is the only way of improving the future," said Kerrie Howard, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

"Millions in Guatemala are caught up in a cycle of poverty, violence, discrimination and impunity. Violence against women, discrimination against indigenous peoples, the crisis in the public security system and the endemic impunity suffered by all are only symptoms of the human rights crisis facing Guatemala," said Kerrie Howard.

"Reports of violence in the context of the electoral campaign are extremely concerning. Amnesty International calls on all candidates to immediately condemn acts of political violence and ensure the electoral campaign is conducted in a manner consistent with respect for the rule of law and human rights standards."

In the letter, Amnesty International highlights some of the organization's greatest concerns regarding the human rights situation in Guatemala – including the endemic impunity for past and present cases of human rights violations, the abuses suffered by women and indigenous peoples and the attacks against human rights activists.

Over the last few years, the situation of public security has deteriorated with increasing murder rates being reported by the police. In this context, the security forces have been accused of being implicated in cases of torture and killings of those they deem to be criminals or members of youth gangs, including minors. Most of these reports are never investigated.

Hundreds of women in Guatemala continue to be victims of sexual abuse and killings. According to police records, 581 women were killed in 2006 alone, adding to a total of over 2,200 brutally murdered since 2001. Little progress has been made in investigating any of the cases and women continue to be in grave danger.

Amnesty International's letter also highlights the precarious situation of people living in rural areas, including indigenous peoples, who often face high levels of poverty and are at the centre of violent disputes over the tenancy and ownership of land. Since 2004, Amnesty International has received reports of more than 85 evictions across Guatemala. Many of them resulting in serious human rights violations, injuries and loss of homes.

The organization also expressed concern over the threats, intimidation and attacks faced by human rights

activists in Guatemala. According to local organizations there have been around 136 cases of intimidation or attacks against activists in the first six months of 2007 alone. The organizations also recorded 577 incidents between 2004 and 2006. Most of these cases go uninvestigated and unpunished. "Without real political will from the presidential candidates to take action and stop these abuses, real change in Guatemala will be slow and difficult. Amnesty International calls on all presidential candidates to expressly commit themselves to demonstrating in practice the political will necessary to address human rights concerns," said Kerrie Howard.

A copy of Amnesty International's open letter to Guatemala's Presidential candidates will be available from 29 August on: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR34202007>

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