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Fear for safety

6 October 2000

GUATEMALA

Guatemalan Forensic Anthropological Foundation members
USAC Students' Association
Members of Human Rights organizations

After government statements that appeared to condone attacks on human rights activists, Amnesty International is very concerned for the safety of the members of these organizations.

On 2 October, members of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, which has been involved in the exhumations of the mass clandestine graves of villagers killed during Guatemala's long civil conflict, were attacked by two heavily armed individuals who stole one of the Foundation's pick-up trucks.

The following day, there was a break-in at the central office of the Students' Association of the Autonomous State University of Guatemala (USAC). The *Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios* (AEU), University Students' Association, has traditionally been outspoken on political and human rights issues and its leaders have been frequent targets of human rights abuses in the past.

Guatemala is now in the midst of a crime wave, which makes it difficult to be certain who was responsible for these two attacks. However, they came in the wake of a number of very worrying public statements from the government, which implied that human rights activists are involved in a campaign to destabilise the country, and also that they may be attacked by unknown forces. Analysts in Guatemala believe that these statements may have served, intentionally or not, as a signal that NGOs and human rights activists are fair targets for attack, putting them at particular risk.

On 28 September, the Minister of the Interior declared that "there are groups that want to cause instability, to create chaos and anarchy." Such groups, he said, "plan to set off bombs that will scatter propaganda leaflets when they explode...they will also burn the central offices of NGOs". The Vice-president of the Guatemalan Congress, Leonel Soto Arango, declared two days later: "The Minister of the Interior and the director of the National Civil Police have informed us that there are some individuals, who claim to be human rights activists, that want to create instability in the country by causing confrontations."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

These attacks are taking place against a backdrop of threats and abuses against members of human rights organizations, journalists and others involved in human rights activism (see UA 199/00, UA 212/00, UA 223/00, UA 256/00 and UA 265/00).

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of members of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, who were attacked on 2 October, and the USAC Students' Association, whose offices were burgled the following day;
- expressing concern that recent government statements appear to legitimise attacks on human rights activists;

- calling on the authorities to investigate these attacks and bring those responsible to justice;
- urging the authorities to take all necessary steps to ensure the security of all of those involved in legitimate NGO and human rights work.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

Lic. Alfonso Portillo Cabrera
Presidente de la República de Guatemala
6a. Avenida "A" 4-18, Zona 1
Ciudad de Guatemala , GUATEMALA
Fax: + 502 221 4423/ 221 4537
Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente/ Dear President

Minister of the Interior

Sr. Byron Barrientos
Ministro de Gobernación
Ministerio de Gobernación
6ª Avenida 4-64, Zona 4
Ciudad de Guatemala , GUATEMALA
Fax: + 502 362 0239/ 362 0237
Salutation: Señor Ministro / Dear Minister

President of Congress

Gral. Efraín Ríos Montt
9ª Avenida 9-44, Zona 1
Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA
Fax: + 502 220 4024
Salutation: Dear President of the Congress/ Señor Presidente del Congreso

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nacional@prensalibre.com.gt

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 17 November 2000.