

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Death threats/Harassment

20 September 1991

EL SALVADOR: Mirtala LOPEZ and other human rights workers

Amnesty International is concerned at the continuing wave of death threats and other forms of harassment directed against human rights workers and members of grassroots organizations in El Salvador.

On 12 September 1991 a letter from the **Frente Anticomunista de El Salvador (FAS)**, the Salvadorian Anti-Communist Front, was delivered to the offices of the **Comité Cristiano Pro Desplazados de El Salvador (CRIPDES)**, the Christian Committee for the Displaced of El Salvador, addressed to "the terrorist leader Mirtala López - front organization CRIPDES" [Sp: cabecilla terrorista Mirtala López - organización de fachada CRIPDES]. In the letter, the FAS stated that:

"just as we eliminated the Jesuits from the UCA, we are firm in our determination to end the lives of those who are said to be leaders of machiavellian organizations of the FMLN-FDR... Your youth IS ON THE VERGE OF DANGER, YOUR END IS NEAR". [Sp: Así como eliminamos a los Jesuitas de la UCA, estamos firmes en nuestro compromiso por terminar con la vida de los que se dicen ser dirigentes de los maquiavélicos organismos del FMLN-FDR...Tu juventud ESTÁ AL BORDE DEL PELIGRO. TU FIN SE ACERCA."]

(Six Jesuit priests and two staff of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) were murdered by army troops in November 1989. Prior to their death the Jesuits were publicly accused by the military of having links with the armed opposition group, the FMLN-FDR.)

On 18 September, Mirtala López received a second letter from the FAS, addressed to "Terrorist Mirtala López", which states:

"We are going to decapitate the terrorist leaders...The moment for justice to be done approaches. YOUR YOUTH ENDS TODAY." [Sp: Vamos a descabezar a los dirigentes terroristas...El momento de hacer justicia se acerca, TU JUVENTUD TERMINA HOY.]

Mirtala López, who has recently been vocal in denouncing human rights abuses by the military against repopulated communities, had been the object of threats prior to this incident. CRIPDES claim that a commander of a local military brigade in Chalatenango had threatened to arrest her on 3 September during a visit by CRIPDES workers to repopulated communities in the area. On 7 September she was followed in the streets of San Salvador by a vehicle with tinted windows. Mirtala López is also active in the **Comité Permanente para el Debate Nacional (CPDN)**, the Committee for the National Debate, a coalition of grassroots and church organizations which in recent weeks has been repeatedly accused by the Minister of Defence of being a front group for the FMLN. Mirtala López was previously arrested in April 1989 following a raid by police on the CRIPDES offices. She and seven other CRIPDES workers

were severely tortured during police detention before being released without charge.

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The **Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (CDHES)**, the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, has also recently reported incidents of threats and intimidation directed against its staff. On 22 August, a group of CDHES workers (trabajadoras) were followed as they left the CDHES offices by armed men in civilian clothing. On 4 September **Zuleyma Argueta**, an ex-member of staff of the CDHES, was detained without warrant by men in civilian clothing and taken to the National Police, where she was interrogated regarding the work of the CDHES and the identity of other staff members. She was reportedly consigned to Ilopango prison on 7 September accused of possession of subversive documents. Amnesty International is currently looking into her legal situation. The day after her arrest, the house of a female member of the CDHES' legal department was searched without warrant by uniformed members of the National Police. The CDHES offices have reportedly been under surveillance since the end of August by men in civilian clothing believed to be members of the National Police.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In recent months Amnesty International has documented a resurgent pattern of threats and intimidatory acts carried out openly by government security forces or by clandestine groups, such as the FAS, which Amnesty International believes are acting with their acquiescence. These threats are directed at groups and individuals perceived by the authorities as sympathising or having links with the FMLN armed opposition group. CRIPDES and the CDHES are amongst many Salvadorian humanitarian organizations whose criticism of human rights violations by the government has led to their being identified with the FMLN in the eyes of the authorities.

In June 1991, the FAS issued leaflets threatening members of opposition groups and several popular organizations reported that their staff had received death threats by telephone (see UA 223/91 AMR 29/08/91). Amnesty has documented numerous cases in the past where people who receive threats of this kind are subsequently arrested and tortured or extrajudicially executed. The organization is concerned that the most recent incidents may lead to further serious human rights violations against members of human rights and other humanitarian organizations.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: Telegrams/Telexes/Faxes/Express Letters:

- expressing your concern at the recent death threats by the Frente Anticomunista Salvadoreño against Mirtala López of CRIPDES, the surveillance of human rights workers by armed individuals and the search without warrant of the house of a CDHES member by the National Police;

- saying that these incidents appear to be part of a pattern of harassment and intimidation of human rights workers by unidentified individuals and uniformed members of the National Police;
- urging that these incidents be immediately investigated and that those found to be responsible be brought to justice;
- asking that steps be taken to ensure that Mirtala López and other Salvadorian human rights workers are able to carry out their work without threat to their physical security.

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APPEALS TO:

1.

(Vice Minister of the Presidency)

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2.

(Minister of Defence)

Gral. René Emilio Ponce **Señor Ministro**
Ministro de Defensa
Ministerio de Defensa y de Seguridad Pública
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3.

(Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs)

Lic. Ricardo Valdivieso **Señor Viceministro**
Viceministro de Relaciones Exteriores
Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores
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COPIES TO:

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and to diplomatic representatives of El Salvador in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat or your section office if sending appeals after 1 November 1991.