

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 34/050/2003

UA 252/03

Death threats/fear for safety

22 August 2003

GUATEMALA	Juan Carlos Aquino (m)]
	Carlos René Torres (m)] journalists
	Edwin Perdomo (m)]
	Juan Luis Font (m)]

The four journalists named above, have been harassed and intimidated in what appears to be a wider campaign to silence those who report on sensitive political issues including corruption by government officials or events surrounding the controversial candidacy of General Efraín Ríos Montt.

On 18 August, Juan Carlos Aquino, from the Department of Zacapa, received a phone call in which he was told "*te vamos a dar jarabe*", "we will beat the hell out of you" and warned to stop making statements against the ruling party, *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG)*, Guatemalan Republican Front. He was told not to make any statements against "mi general", referring to the current President of Congress and controversial presidential candidate General Efraín Ríos Montt. The threat followed the publication of an article he had written in a national newspaper relating to the exhumations of clandestine (hidden/secret) cemeteries in Rabinal, Alta Verapaz.

Juan Carlos Aquino has received approximately five anonymous telephone calls since 25 July, in which he has been told to stop airing information on what happened during what became known as "*jueves negro*", "Black Thursday", and the FRG's alleged involvement in the mob violence (see background information for more details). In several calls, he was told to close his news program *Punto Informativo*, Information Point, and warned "*de nada le servirá la policía lo cuide, pues de cualquier lugar le pueden dar alcance*", "police protection will not help you, we can get you wherever you are". He was also warned that where he lived was known, as was his seven year old son's school, and his wife's place of work.

After leaving work on the night of 10 August, Carlos René Torres, from the television program '*Diálogo*' (Dialogue) in the Department of Chiquimula, was followed by a dark coloured vehicle with polarised windows, for several blocks, before it tried to run him over. The following week, he received several phone calls in which he was told that he had to change the format of his program, and that if he failed to do so, he, or one of his family would die. On 17 August, he was once again followed by a dark vehicle with polarised windows in a threatening manner. The local representative of the Human Rights Ombudsman fears that the threats may be linked to episodes of '*Diálogo*' which often fiercely criticise local and regional authorities as well as departmental congressmen.

On 18 August, Edwin Perdomo, regional reporter in Puerto Barrios, Department of Izabal, for the national newspaper *Prensa Libre*, received an anonymous telephone call in which he was told that the caller knew where he lived, the car he drove, and his daily movements. Earlier on 28 and 30 July, he had received several threatening telephone calls, in one of which he was told that if he carried on "*si continua hablando pendejadas del FRG te vas a morir*", "if you carry on talking rubbish about the FRG you will die". On the night of 24 March, he had been followed by a car from outside his house to the town of Morales over 40 kilometres away. He has not yet received any police protection, despite a request by the local representative of the Human Rights Ombudsman.

On 15 August, unidentified individuals warned another journalist, Juan Luis Font, that he was being watched and that he should take care. Together with several other prominent journalists, Juan Luis Font had received an anonymous threatening email on 27 June.

Other acts of intimidation against journalists have also been reported in the departments of Alta Verapaz, Retalhuleu, Quetzaltenango and Escuintla.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is concerned that journalists are being targeted in what appears to be a systematic attempt to intimidate them into stopping their reporting on sensitive issues, including corruption by government officials and the controversial candidacy of General Efraín Ríos Montt, who presided over one of the worst phases of the army's scorched earth counter-insurgency campaign in the rural areas during the early 1980s and stands accused of genocide and other crimes against humanity.

Allegedly organised and financed by the FRG, armed mobs of ex-paramilitaries, peasants and officials from the FRG, were bussed into the capital on 24 and 25 July. They then rioted in response to the Constitutional Court's temporary suspension of the highly controversial presidential candidacy of Ríos Montt. During what became known as "*jueves negro*", "Black Thursday", one journalist died from a heart attack after he was chased by mobs. Reporter Juan Carlos Torres, from *El Periódico* was reportedly covered in gasoline, but managed to escape before he could be set alight. Many other acts of aggression against journalists were also reported during the violence that followed.

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

- expressing grave concern for the safety of all Guatemalan journalists covering corruption by government officials or events surrounding the controversial candidacy of General Ríos Montt, specifically Juan Carlos Aquino, Carlos René Torres, Edwin Perdomo and Juan Luis Font;
- urging that, in accordance with their wishes, immediate measures be taken to ensure their safety;
- pressing the authorities to carry out an immediate, impartial and exhaustive investigation into the reported threats and acts of intimidation against the journalists, to make the results public and bring those responsible to justice;
- expressing concern for the safety of all human rights defenders working to protect human rights and freedom of expression, particularly those who have recently faced threats and intimidation, including those named above.

APPEALS TO:

Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Journalists and Trade Unionists

Lic. Marco Antonio Cortez Sis

Fiscal de delitos contra periodistas y sindicalistas

7ª. Avenida 11-20 Zona 1

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 220 6873 (if someone answers please say "fax por favor")

Salutation: Dear Special Prosecutor/Señor Fiscal Especial

Director General of the National Civil Police

Comisario General Oscar Raúl Segura Sánchez

Director General de la Policía Nacional Civil

6ª Avenida 13-71, Zona 1

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 251 9382

Salutation: Dear Director/Señor Director

Minister of the Interior

Lic. Adolfo Reyes Calderón

Ministro de Gobernación

6ª Avenida 4-64, Zona 4

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 362 0237

Salutation: Dear Minister/Señor Ministro

COPIES TO:

Newspaper

Diario Prensa Libre
13 Calle 9-31, Zona I
Ciudad de Guatemala 01001, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 251 8768/ 230 2193/ 230 2257 (if someone answers please say "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 3 October 2003.