

### **Mexico: the right to defend human rights must be upheld**

*One year into President Vicente Fox's administration, and despite the new government's repeated statements in support of human rights, the harassment, threats and defamation suffered by Mexican human rights activists remains as serious as ever, Amnesty International said today.*

*The organization released today in Mexico a new report describing the ongoing pattern of abuses against those engaged in the defence of human rights. The report covers more than 35 cases from 1996 onwards, including the first year of President Fox, and details practices routinely used by past and present Mexican authorities, or those operating with their consent or knowledge, to silence human rights defenders.*

*"The recent murder of human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa sharply brought the plight of Mexican human rights defenders under the international spotlight," Amnesty International said. "However, that was but the tip of the iceberg. Day in, day out, men and women committed to the promotion and protection of human rights pay a very high price for their work."*

*Throughout Mexico, human rights promotion work is frequently, and wrongly, portrayed as a criminal or subversive activity. Human rights activists are the victims of smear campaigns and fabricated accusations aimed at undermining their credibility and the legitimacy of their work; they receive death threats and intimidation; they have their phones tapped and their communications intercepted; and harassment often does not stop short of physical violence.*

Human rights defenders working in remote areas have been particularly exposed to attacks, including attempted killings, at the hands of armed civilians, local political bosses or political groupings, all acting with some degree of acquiescence or connivance on the part of the authorities.

It is clear that in many cases the aim of these attacks against human rights defenders has been to silence or undermine their complaints so that the perpetrators of human rights violations may escape criminal prosecution.

"Almost invariably, investigations into reports of harassment against human rights activists have been seriously flawed and inconclusive." Amnesty International said, emphasizing that responsibility, under both domestic and international legislation, for resolving all the cases outlined in its report remains with the current authorities, regardless of whether the violations took place under previous administrations.

"Protection measures taken have been at best half-hearted and have only materialized as a result of persistent international pressure, fuelling suspicion that such measures are little more than a public relations exercise. Past and present Mexican authorities have done virtually nothing to address harassment of human rights activists, despite multiple public pledges and rhetoric to the contrary."

"To put an end to the harassment and intimidation of human rights activists, the Mexican authorities must send a clear signal that human rights work is legitimate and valuable, and that no attack on those carrying it out will be tolerated," Amnesty International urged.

"A first concrete step would be to ensure prompt, impartial and independent investigations into all cases of human rights violations

against human rights defenders -- including the murder of Digna Ochoa -- leading to those responsible facing justice and reparation for the victims or their relatives," the organization added.

Amnesty International is urging both federal and state authorities to adopt the recommendations contained in the report for the protection of human rights defenders and their work. The report also contains eight recommendations for the National and State Human Rights Commissions.

"We hope that the report will contribute to further strengthening the human rights movement in Mexico and encourage the government to match its human right rhetoric with a comprehensive policy on human rights defenders involving radical transformations at all levels of the state apparatus," the organization said.

### **Background**

The right to defend human rights is now internationally recognised. Exactly three years ago, on 9 December 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, commonly known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The adoption of this Declaration is international recognition of the crucial role that human rights defenders are playing across the world in advancing the promotion and protection of human rights. By establishing a set of principles to safeguard this important work and those who carry it out, the Declaration highlights the increasing significance of the role of individuals and groups from civil society in independently scrutinizing and criticizing official policy and practice on human rights.

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