

Urgent Action In Focus

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Marielos Monzon at the award ceremony

Guatemala: Press Freedom

Guatemalan journalist Marielos Monzon came to London in September to collect the AIUK 2005 Human Rights Journalism Under Threat award. In her acceptance speech she described a country in which the people who carried out the gross human rights violations of the 36-year

internal conflict have not only gone unpunished but in many cases are still in positions of power.

The award is made every year to journalists who put themselves at risk by reporting on the human rights situation

in their own country. Marielos Monzon told the audience, "I would like to share this honour with all Guatemalan journalists who work under very difficult conditions in my country and who constantly defend their right to freedom of expression and the right of the Guatemalan people to information and to denounce violations of their rights. I would also like to honour all the human-rights defenders whose work has been persecuted, discredited and in some cases, criminalised."

Marielos has been tireless in her reporting on the human rights situation in Guatemala, as the presenter of *Buenos días con Marielos Monzón* (Good morning with Marielos Monzón) and *Punto de Encuentro* (Meeting Point), on an FM station run by San Carlos University in Guatemala City, and in her weekly column in the newspaper *Prensa Libre*. She has reported on a variety of sensitive issues, including the implementation of the 1996 Peace Accords that ended the country's long-running internal conflict and the rights of indigenous people, which are protected by law but still flouted with impunity.

She has also reported on the increasing number of murders of women in exceptionally brutal circumstances, often involving sexual violence. The number of such killings has risen dramatically in the past few years (police recorded 527 in 2004; 383 in 2003 and 163 in 2002). These records are thought to under-represent the true figure: well over half these deaths (those not caused by gunshot or knife wounds) are attributed to "other causes". This description masks the savage nature of killings in which the victims' bodies present evidence of rape, torture, dismemberment and mutilation in the moments leading to their deaths. Of 1,900 such killings prosecuted since 2001, only five have led to convictions.

This is a reflection of the climate of impunity in which clandestine and illegal armed groups still operate in Guatemala.

These groups have been linked to organised crime and are thought to have infiltrated the police, army and some state institutions. Clandestine groups are believed to be responsible for many attacks on human rights defenders who have denounced their activities, or campaigned for justice for violations committed by their members, or former members of the security forces.

Marielos Monzon most recently attracted the attention of these groups by reporting on the widespread opposition to the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which its opponents say will destroy the livelihood of the country's peasant farmers and reduce access to affordable medicines for the majority of the population, amongst many other concerns. There were nationwide protests against CAFTA on 14 March, but the following day President Oscar Berger signed it into law.

Marielos Monzon's radio station broadcast two special programmes on the police and army's violent suppression of the protests in the municipality of Colotenango and in Guatemala City. At least one protestor was killed and a dozen injured. On 17 March she took a series of calls on her mobile phone which appeared to have been made from her own house. In the first three calls she heard only silence, but the fourth came from a man who told her, "deja de defender a esos indios hediondos hija de puta o te vamos a matar", "Stop defending those stinking Indians you bitch or we will kill you."

A few minutes after this she received a call from the Uruguayan Embassy, seeking confirmation of reports in two Uruguayan newspapers that her colleague Gabriel Mazzarovich (who is a Uruguayan citizen) had died. The stories were false, and appeared to have been fed to the newspapers to intimidate Mazzarovich.

Journalists who speak out in defence of

human rights, as Marielos Monzon does, are putting their lives in grave danger, as she is all too aware. Four of her colleagues at *Prensa Libre* were kidnapped in October 2003 by former members of the paramilitary Civilian Self-Defence Patrols (PAC). They were released two days later. A photographer for the paper, Roberto Martínez, had been less fortunate: he was killed in Guatemala City in April 2000 when two private security guards opened fire on demonstrators protesting against bus fare increases.

According to the Guatemalan non-governmental organization *Movimiento Nacional por los Derechos Humanos* (National Movement for Human Rights), in 2004 there were 122 attacks on human rights defenders. The beginning of 2005 witnessed a renewed attack from clandestine groups and organised criminal gangs aimed at intimidating and hindering the work of human rights defenders. Twenty-six were reportedly threatened or attacked between 1 January and 25 February. This included an attempt to murder a trade unionist, attempts to burn alive a municipal worker who had complained about corruption, and numerous "robberies" of human rights organizations, in which equipment and human rights information were taken from their premises. Some international organizations operating in Guatemala have also been subject to harassment since President Berger came to power in January 2004.

Marielos has been subjected to death threats and intimidation because of her work in Guatemala highlighting human

rights abuses on many occasions. In 2003 she and her two children were forced to leave the country for three months, with help from Amnesty International, after gunmen came into her house to threaten them.

What motivates her to risk her life in this way? In her own words, "My father was murdered when I was 10 years old, in 1981. He was murdered by a death squad. He had a commitment to have a better Guatemala. He was a human rights lawyer, who had a dream of a better Guatemala, so I am continuing on his path." The other thing that drives her is that "journalism is just like a passion, something you need to do, something inside you. Also, I have a commitment to all these widows, to all these women and men who suffer because the perpetrators of the massacres live beside them in the same town. They have the courage to come to you and tell the stories, so it is like a commitment for me, being a journalist. I have two children and I think they deserve a better future. The young people in Guatemala deserve something better."

Amnesty International has worked with Marielos Monzon for a number of years, and has issued several UAs on her behalf (the latest is UA 70/05, AMR 34/13/2005, 18 March 2005). For further details of the Human Rights Journalism Under Threat award, see the AI UK website: <http://www.amnesty.org.uk>