

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Ecuador: the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press at risk**

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of a number of well-known Ecuadorian journalists who, over the last few weeks, have been the object of armed attacks or death threats. The most recent of these attacks took place in the early hours of 4 March 2004 and involved the director of the Ecuadorian daily, *El Tiempo*, Iván Toral Calle. According to reports, Iván Toral was relaxing at home in the town of Cuenca when unknown individuals fired at his house, in the direction of his bedroom.

This attack is unfortunately not an isolated incident. Last February, Amnesty International published an urgent action on behalf of journalists Miguel Rivadeneira of *Radio Quito*, Marco Pérez of *Radio Tarqui*, Paco Velasco of *Radio La Luna* and Kintto Lucas of the agency *IPS*, who complained to the human rights organisation that they had received various threats over the period September 2003 to January 2004. In the journalists' opinion, they were being threatened for their critical attitude towards the Lucio Gutiérrez government.

In January, government authorities condemned the attack on Miguel Rivadeneira and publicly stated that they would not tolerate any violation of the freedom of the press and would investigate these acts. That same month, the Ecuadorian government announced that it was closing Radio La Luna and bringing charges against the journalist Paco Velasco for slander.

Amnesty International has continued to receive complaints of similar incidents against well-known journalists in the country and yet, to date, the Ecuadorian authorities have arrested none of the apparent perpetrators. In February, Carlos Muñoz Insua, executive president of *Telesistema*, complained to Amnesty International that various unidentified individuals had fired at his vehicle on 9 February, seriously wounding his driver, who subsequently died. Managers of the *El Comercio* daily newspaper also made a complaint that same day to the Attorney-General's office in relation to recent threats allegedly received by five of their journalists and, on 11 February, *Teleamazonas* publicly announced that it had received three telephone calls with the threat, "Shut up or we'll kill you".

Amnesty International considers that it is the responsibility of the Ecuadorian state to ensure that all Ecuadorians, including those who work in the media, enjoy the right to unrestricted freedom of expression. The organisation therefore urges the Ecuadorian government to put its commitment and respect for human rights into practice by publicly, energetically and unequivocally condemning each and every one of the attacks on the media and journalists that have taken place over the last few months. The organisation also urges the authorities to initiate exhaustive, independent and impartial investigations into each of these attacks and acts of intimidation against journalists, to publish the results of such investigations and bring those allegedly responsible to justice.