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Guatemala: Activists receive over 40 death threats by text message

Amnesty International today warned that the lives of nine activists working for two prominent human rights organizations in Guatemala are at risk after they received dozens of death threats by SMS text messages and one was followed by two unknown armed men.

Between 30 April and 5 May, nine members of the Association for the Study and Promotion of Security under Democracy and the Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit received over 40 SMS text messages containing abuse and death threats. The texts focused on their work to bring to justice those responsible for the crimes committed during Guatemala's internal armed conflict.

One of the messages, sent on 2 May read: "You've got one hour, this is the last warning. Stop messing with us, military declassified files. We'll kill your kids first, then you."

On the morning of 4 May two unknown men sat in a dark green car with tinted windows parked outside the house of one of the activists. Police officers were called and they later told the activist that the men were armed, had a valid licence to carry the weapons and were let go because they were considered not to be posing a threat. At the same time, two of the activists received the same SMS text message, which read: "I am watching you [...] It's good that you didn't go to work, I have my sight set at you. Son of a bitch [...] you're scared."

"The death threats received by these activists are an illustration of a climate of insecurity and fear in Guatemala, where those working to protect human rights and seek justice are required to do so at great personal risk," said Kerrie Howard, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"The government must take immediate steps to protect these activists and ensure they are able to carry out their legitimate and important work free from fear," said Kerrie Howard.

The victims of the threats are members of Association for the Study and Promotion of Security under Democracy (Asociación para el Estudio y Promoción de la Seguridad en Democracia SEDEM and Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (Unidad de Protección de Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos, UDEFEGUA. SEDEM has campaigned for justice for the crimes committed during the 1960-1996 internal armed conflict, including by urging the authorities to declassify military archives that might contain evidence of some of the crimes. UDEFEGUA has supported hundreds of Guatemalan activists at risk since 2000.

Both organizations have asked Amnesty International to withhold the names of the victims.

Last March, members of the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office working on legal cases from the time of the internal armed conflict were victims of threats and attacks. Days later, the Ombudsman's wife, Gladys

Monterroso, was kidnapped and tortured.

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