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Guatemala: Civil patrollers hold human rights institutions to ransom

Threats by former civil patrols members against local offices of Guatemala's human rights ombudsman are totally unacceptable, Amnesty International said today.

Former members of the *Patrullas de Auto-Defensa Civil* (PAC), known as the civil patrols, responsible for mass human rights violations during Guatemala's long-running internal conflict, have threatened that they will occupy and burn local offices of the Human Rights Procurator's office if their demands for recompense for their patrol service during the conflict are not fully met.

"The Human Rights Procurator's office plays a crucial role in the protection of human rights in the country, and the Guatemalan authorities must make it clear that threats and attacks against it will not be tolerated," Amnesty International said, calling for full and impartial investigations into the threats and for the prosecution of anyone involved in occupations or other illegal acts against the Human Rights Procurator's offices.

The organization added that donor governments, which have supported and financed the peace process in Guatemala and provided financial backing to the Human Rights Procurator's office through cooperation agreements, should insist on measures to be taken to allow this important institution to continue its vital work.

"Thousands of victims of the human rights violations committed in Guatemala during the conflict deserve nothing less than truth, justice and reparations," Amnesty International said.

"The Guatemalan authorities and the international community should do everything in their power to stop attempts at interfering with the main state institution charged with protecting human rights. At the same time, they must press for an end to the impunity which has so far protected those responsible for orchestrating, planning and carrying out the atrocities committed during the conflict," the organization said.

Background

During Guatemala's 30 year-long conflict, civil patrols were formed at military behest and operated under military orders. Service in them was obligatory and some of those who carried abuses were coerced into doing so, under threat of death to themselves and their families.

Peace Accords signed under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) 1996 provided for the patrols to be disbanded, but in fact, they have continued to operate in various areas of the country and have allegedly been responsible for new abuses.

In the course of 2002, former patrols members have been particularly vehement in demanding recompense for the service they rendered while serving in the patrols, with

demonstrations of up to 20,000 patrollers at a time taking place throughout the country. Their activities have been most visible and insistent in areas where the civil conflict was most bitter, and the patrols therefore most aggressively mobilised by the army to support its scorched earth counter-insurgency campaign.

The government has responded to the patrollers pressure with promises to provide some form of recompense payment financed via Eurobonds, but the former patrollers have rejected these offers as inadequate.

There is widespread concern in Guatemala that the patrollers' demonstrations have been organised by the Association of Guatemalan military veterans, said to be linked to the ruling political party of Guatemalan president Alfonso Portillo, the *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco* (FRG), Guatemalan Republican Front, and that offers from President Portillo to recompense the patrollers are aimed at buying their votes for the FRG in the approaching national elections, scheduled for 2003

So far, specific threats from the patrollers have reportedly been directed at Human Rights Procurator's offices in the departments of Huehuetenango, Sololá, Baja Verapaz, San Marcos, and El Petén.

Public Document

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