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Guatemala: another step towards justice for the forgotten victims

Any action to tackle impunity is a step towards justice, Amnesty International said today reacting to the decision by Spain's main criminal court, the *Audiencia Nacional*, to open an investigation into accusations of genocide made by Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Rigoberta Menchú, against former Guatemalan officials.

“We firmly support all efforts to bring the perpetrators of Guatemala’s agony to justice,” added the organization, which has been monitoring the human rights situation in Guatemala for many years.

The organization will be closely watching developments in all judicial proceedings under way to end impunity in Guatemala, whether in national courts, via inter-American mechanisms for human rights protection, or through requests for prosecutions abroad for crimes for which universal jurisdiction is argued -- as in the Menchú suit.

“This latest suit is another sign that -- after being denied for decades by Guatemalan authorities and their foreign supporters -- the truth about the atrocities suffered by the Guatemalan people during the conflict is at last coming to light,” Amnesty International said.

The organization described the gross abuses committed by the Guatemalan security forces in a bid to suppress all real, perceived or potential opponents, as a “government program of political murder.”

The organization is calling on the new government, which took office in January, to fulfil its undertakings on human rights, and in particular:

- to establish a special commission to investigate and take appropriate measures concerning the conduct of the military during the armed conflict;
- to initiate a government program to exhume the mass graves where tens of thousands of victims still lie unacknowledged;
- to take steps to establish the truth about the tens of thousands of people, including children, who “disappeared” during the conflict;
- to provide reparations to victims and their families.

“The true and lasting peace promised by the 1996 Peace Accord in Guatemala can only be constructed on a foundation of justice and the rule of law,” Amnesty International said.

“It is absolutely vital that perpetrators answer for their crimes, that victims see justice done, and that a clear message is sent that such abuses will never again be tolerated.”

Background

The Spanish Court’s decision was in response to a suit lodged in December by Guatemalan indigenous leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Rigoberta Menchú. Ms Menchú’s petition named a number of past officials as having conceived and implemented a brutal

counter-insurgency strategy which cost the lives of tens of thousands of non-combatant indigenous peasants, including members of her own family, during Guatemala's long-term civil conflict. The suit has since been supported by several other Guatemalan human rights organizations and a number of individual victims and their families.

Alongside the Menchú suit, a growing number of victims and their families are starting to come forward and seek justice and redress in Guatemala, especially after the publication of two well-documented reports by the Guatemalan Church's Recuperation of the Historical Memory Project and the UN-supported Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), which identified the armed forces as being responsible for large-scale human rights violations.

Despite a succession of amnesties, the legal path for national prosecution of certain human rights crimes -- including genocide -- was left open in Guatemala's 1996 Law of National Reconciliation.

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**For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London,
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