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Guatemala: Human rights community under siege

The international community must condemn the recent spate of outrageous attacks on human rights defenders in Guatemala, Amnesty International said today after a raid on a prominent human rights organization on Monday.

"Many countries generously contributed to the Guatemala Peace Process and to post-conflict efforts to rebuild the country. But these latest incidents cast grave doubt on the will and ability of the Guatemalan authorities to respect and deliver on the agreements reached in the Peace Accords," the organization said.

On 4 September four heavily armed men forced their way into the Guatemala City offices used by both FAMDEGUA, one of the country's oldest and best respected human rights groups, and a new human rights group, Hijos, both of which work on cases of people who "disappeared" during the civil conflict.

According to FAMDEGUA's director, Aura Elena Farfán, the raiders threw staff to the floor, put pistols to their heads and forced the men to strip. The office telephone lines were cut and the staff repeatedly threatened with death. The assailants then made off with computers containing records of important human rights cases, other office equipment, money and one of the group's vehicles.

"This episode was but the last in a new and highly disturbing wave of threats and abuses against members of human rights organizations,

journalists and others involved in key human rights cases in Guatemala," Amnesty International said.

In August, Celso Balán, a representative of another prominent Guatemalan rights organization, the Centre for Legal Action in Human Rights (CALDH), was seized, beaten, drugged and robbed in San Martín Jilotepeque, Chimaltenango Department, by two people thought to be involved in paramilitary organizations.

Mr. Balán works with a CALDH project which helps relatives organize exhumations of mass clandestine graves containing the remains of villagers massacred by the Guatemalan army and their civilian adjuncts, the civil patrols, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Evidence uncovered through such exhumations is then used to initiate proceedings against those believed responsible for the mass killings.

Other incidents include a raid in August on the office of Álvaro Colom Caballeros, presidential candidate for the left-leaning Alianza Nueva Nación in the last presidential elections, death threats to numerous journalists and the killing in July of two members of a non-governmental human rights group in Sololá working on indigenous land issues.

"These attacks have given rise to fears that a parallel power structure is operating in Guatemala and that military strongmen from the past, including those responsible for the worst atrocities of the war years, hold the reins of power behind the scenes," Amnesty International said.

"Guatemala's past has been too tragic to let history even begin to repeat itself," the organization added. "It is vital that the international community show its outrage now."

Background

FAMDEGUA is an alliance of relatives of Guatemalans who "disappeared" during the country's long-term civil conflict. *Hijos, Children*, was formed recently by young people who were children when their parents "disappeared", and have joined together to try and locate them.

FAMDEGUA has been a key actor in promoting exhumations and initiating proceedings against those responsible for the estimated more than 600 massacres of the civil conflict years, the vast majority of which were attributed to the army by the country's Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), established under the 1996 Peace Accords. The victims were mainly indigenous peasants, which led the CEH to conclude that the Guatemalan army had committed genocide in four specific areas of the country.

FAMDEGUA is particularly associated with the case of the Dos Erres massacre in El Petén in 1982 when 350 people -- men, women and children -- were massacred. The women were subjected to mass rape before being extrajudicially executed. As a result of exhumations promoted by FAMDEGUA, some 187 remains have so far been identified. At least 67 were of children under the age of 12. Based on these findings, proceedings against those responsible have moved slowly through the Guatemalan Courts and claims for compensation lodged. Those involved in efforts to bring the perpetrators to justice have suffered a series of threats and abuses, and several have been forced into exile in fear for their lives. In March 2000, 18 years after the event, President Alfonso Portillo formally acknowledged State responsibility for the killings. However the arrest orders issued in the same month for nine soldiers were later stayed by the Constitutional Court, and they remain at large.

The latest abuses and failure to bring to justice those responsible for the Dos Erres and other massacre cases are in harsh contradiction to the aspirations and standards set out in the Peace Accords. These had signified specific recognition by the authorities of the State's responsibility to guarantee and respect human rights standards and principles and to take special steps to protect individuals and groups working to protect human rights. The parties to the Peace Accord also agreed to act firmly against impunity and to compensate and assist those who had suffered human rights violations during the conflict.

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