

Americas Human Rights Defenders Program

Activity report for July 1998 to June

1999

Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Declaration on the Right and Responsibility Of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote And Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (commonly referred to as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders)

Highlights of the last year

✓ Four Colombian human rights defenders were released following their abduction by Colombian paramilitaries in January 1999. Another defender was released following a similar capture by paramilitary forces in May 1999. On both occasions international campaigning was a crucial factor to their release.

✓ Special appeals were internationally launched on behalf of some thirty human rights defenders in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela.

✓ Together with NGOs from the region, AI successfully lobbied for a resolution on human rights defenders from the Organization of American States.

✓ AI launched a report covering concerns on human rights defenders across Latin America and outlined 11 recommendations regarding the implementation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

✓ AI successfully lobbied the Uruguayan and Argentinean authorities to issue appropriate visas for defenders on internships in those countries.

✓ A total of ten Latin American defenders and their families were supported by Amnesty International on internships in Latin America or Spain.

“As the new millennium arrives, you [NGOs] continue to be a crucial presence at the United Nations and a key force in the international community....Governments need non-governmental partners. The United Nations, for its part, is committed to deepening our alliance with you, and today we are launching an enhanced web site for civil society. I urge you to bring these and your other concerns to the Millennium Forum, and to focus your efforts in a way that can duplicate the success of your advocacy against landmines and for the International Criminal Court. Please, for all our sakes -- for the sake of the international community –keep up the fight.”

Kofi Annan, speech at a UN conference on NGOs and the UN System, 15 September 1999

The United Nations is not the only force paying more attention to the importance of its relations with NGOs working on issues of justice and human rights. Some governments and even private sector

groups are also realizing that listening to the concerns and demands of NGOs can have an important impact on their work and their relations with civil society and local communities.

In all societies, no matter how democratic they may appear, independent scrutiny by civil society makes an important contribution to ensuring that states protect human rights and conduct their activities within the parameters of the laws, treaties and contracts agreed upon with that society. Indeed, the best safeguard for the human rights of all individuals is the opening up of the state to reasonable public scrutiny and the encouragement of the community to become involved in these processes.

Even so, those working to improve human rights are often the target of constant harassment in many countries in Latin America. Despite continuing obstacles, including human rights violations such as political killings and arbitrary detentions, as well as spurious criminal charges and defamation campaigns, the community of human rights defenders remains determined in its goal to achieve better societies in which the dignity and rights of others become reality. These courageous people are a vital link in the chain of human rights defence at all levels, playing a dynamic role in human rights promotion and the struggle to eliminate violations. Crucially, they contribute to strengthening the rule of law and justice.

Pledges to protect human rights defenders under threat are common, even routine, in some countries in the region. Nonetheless, cases documented by Amnesty International show that in reality promises often remain empty and unfulfilled. No matter how sophisticated the rhetoric or the mechanisms initiated ostensibly for the protection of human rights defenders, defenders will continue to be at serious risk if governments fail to exert sufficient political will to implement effective protection programs and to make clear that attacks on human rights defenders will not be tolerated.

The important contribution made by human rights defenders to improving human rights and strengthening civil society was fully acknowledged on 9 December 1998, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders following twelve years hard negotiation. In June 1999, the Organization of American States adopted its first resolution solely supporting human rights defenders following a joint lobby by human rights organizations in the region. Although such steps are just a mere beginning on the road to protecting human rights defenders and safeguarding their right to carry out their legitimate activities, fundamental principles and safeguards have at last been firmly established within the framework of international human rights standards.

More than seventy recommendations were made at the Bogotá Human Rights Defenders' Conference in 1996. Amnesty International agreed to set up the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program to implement nine of these recommendations that refer to the need for better immediate protection. The Program has now been running for more than two years and is currently seeking funds for a further two years from January 2000 to December 2001.

The Americas Human Rights Defenders Program covers the needs of human rights defenders from across Latin America. Over the last year, campaign actions, especially publicity and lobbying, have been undertaken on behalf of defenders at risk in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico Peru and Venezuela. Colombian human rights defenders have been the main beneficiaries of other protection measures, such as internships and accompaniment, on account of the high risk in this country: since the beginning of 1997 more than 25 Colombian defenders have been assassinated. Human rights defenders from Mexico, Chile and Argentina have also received financial support to help them escape imminent danger.

The Americas Human Rights Defenders Program is staffed by two people based at Amnesty International's International Secretariat in London. The coordinator oversees the entire program and organizes work on internships and accompaniment; the campaigner is in charge of the Americas Defenders' Network (see below), including campaign actions and information.

Implementation of Bogotá 1996 recommendations regarding protection mechanisms

Recommendations in this area were divided into three areas.

I. Accompaniment

The need and effectiveness of accompaniment as a protection tool for defenders under threat varies widely throughout the region. Accompaniment of human rights defenders is a key aspect of protection work in Colombia. The Americas Human Rights Defenders Program has focussed attention on supporting Peace Brigades International's Colombia - Project which provides accompaniment to defenders at risk in four regions of Colombia. The Program has also supported initiatives proposed by national or international NGOs as the need has arisen. Support for accompaniment possibilities in other countries, either as sustained projects or ad hoc initiatives, are also being explored.

Paid advertising, declarations and letter-writing campaigns are other forms of accompaniment being promoted by the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program.

II. Leaving their countries, internships etc.

The Bogotá recommendations stressed the importance of assisting human rights defenders at risk to enable them to stay in their country to carry out their legitimate work without hindrance. Campaigning on such cases is crucial. To this end, NGOs in the region and AI Sections have been involved in several high profile actions in support of human rights defenders in Latin America. However, in some instances the danger faced by human rights defenders is so great that they are forced to leave their homes.

In accordance with the Bogotá recommendations, the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program has established internships of up to one years duration with Latin American NGOs, including Amnesty International Sections in Argentina, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Spain. Internships provide defenders at risk with the opportunity to continue their work on human rights in an environment of mutual support. At the time of writing the Defenders' Program was coordinating the placement of ten Colombian human rights defenders and their families on internships outside Colombia.

Not all human rights defenders at risk need or want to participate on internship programs. The Americas Human Rights Program is also assisting defenders who move to other regions of their country in the hope that they may be able to return in the near future. Modest financial support is also being provided to defenders fleeing to countries outside the region. The Program has assisted at least ten defenders and their families in this way. In areas of high risk emergency funds have been set up to ensure individuals and their families can be moved as quickly as possible.

III. Rapid response techniques

The electronic Americas Defenders' Network which operates by electronic mail, has enabled the Americas Human Rights Defenders' Program to act more swiftly and efficiently in favour of human rights defenders at risk and has provided a mechanism for acting on a broader range of cases than would usually be possible. The Network is made up of AI Sections, Groups and Latin American NGOs. Members of the Network have been asked, amongst other things, to meet with diplomatic representatives, organize press coverage or special appeals by high profile personalities. More than ten actions of this kind involving more than 40 human rights defenders were sent out through the Network over the last year. Action originated for the kidnapping of four Colombian human rights defenders at the end of January 1999 had very visible results: AI Sections involved in embassy visits and media work contributed to the defenders eventual release in mid-February.

In addition to actions sent on the electronic Americas Defenders' Network, the Program has compiled several documents for general campaigning needs. The newsletter *On the Front Line* (AI Index: AMR 01/05/98, AMR 01/01/99 and AMR 01/05/99) provides a balance of information and action with

in-depth articles regarding human rights defenders as well as special appeal cases. The newsletter is being used for lobbying, conferences, embassy visits and general publicity needs. The report *More protection, less persecution: Human rights defenders in Latin America* (AMR 01/02/99) and *Special Appeals on behalf of Human Rights Defenders in Latin America* (AMR 01/03/99) provide an overview of the situation facing human rights defenders in Latin America. The report also contains eleven recommendations to Latin American governments on how they should implement principles contained in the United Nations Defenders' Declaration (of 9 December 1998). The cases outlined in the appeal case circular are a useful measuring stick of government political will to make progress on cases of violations against human rights defenders. As many as 200 human rights defenders have benefited from the work initiated as a result of these documents.

Information Technology Equipment

A small fund was allocated to the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program for information technology by the UK Lottery. Small grants were made to organizations operating in remote areas where effective communication would enhance their security situation, for example in Colombia and Mexico. Some grants were also made to small AI Sections.

Funding

The World Wide Fund in Holland has provided funding for the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program since June 1997 to December 1999. It is understood that WWF will be considering funding the Program again in the year 2000. A grant was also provided by the UK Lottery. This fund was spread over a period of two years finishing on 30 June 1999. The Program will not receive further funding from the UK Lottery. Funds have also been received from the Stanley Johnson Foundation in Switzerland and from the Swedish Amnesty Fund. New funds are being sought for the year 2000.

Evaluation

Feedback: An evaluation form was sent to all members of the Network: about ten percent responded. All responses, rated the quality of information and action sent via the Network as excellent or very good. The newsletter *On the Front Line* was rated highly useful. More work needs to be done on updating network members regarding the Program's activities. A large proportion of the work by the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program to protect defenders needs to remain confidential for security reasons and cannot therefore be disseminated widely. Nonetheless, key contacts indicate that the work is making an important contribution to strengthen protection of human rights defenders in Latin America. The Defenders' Network is the only Network of its kind which focuses on human rights defenders in the region: this relevance increases its effectiveness in responding to the needs of defenders at risk.

"The Program is very significant, it has helped many people, it's vital that this work continues. The internships are making a crucial contribution to protecting defenders at serious risk of being killed".
Colombian defender in exile.

"Since its inception, the Program has been the coordinating axis of major action to promote the protection of those in Latin America who decide to protect the rights of others. Since its creation, the Program was the main promoter of the Declaration (on human rights defenders) approved by the United Nations at international level."

Interamerican Institute for Human Rights, Costa Rica

"We think it is a strongly relevant program that needs to be supported and strengthened".
Mexican human rights defender

The Future: It is anticipated that the Coordinator post for the Americas Human Rights Defenders Program will be moved to Costa Rica in January 2000. The Program has gathered considerable momentum over the last year raising the expectations of NGOs in the region and AI Sections. Future aims and intentions of the Program after December 1999 are currently being discussed. Your

suggestions and ideas will help ensure the Program remains a relevant tool for human rights protection in Latin America.