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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Guatemala: Murder of Auxiliary Archbishop Juan Gerardi

Amnesty International today expressed its deep shock and sorrow at the news of the murder in Guatemala City on Sunday of Auxiliary Archbishop Juan Gerardi, Coordinator of the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala, ODHAG. His death came only two days after he had presided over presentation of the ODHAG report on its Recuperation of the Historical Memory Project (REMHI), based on the study of more than 55,000 human rights violations suffered in Guatemala over the 36-year period of civil conflict in the country.

The ODHAG report synthesized testimonies of victims and witnesses to these violations collected over a three year period, and identified the army as responsible for some 90% of the abuses investigated. It also however laid a number of past abuses against civilians at the door of the URNG, the United National Revolutionary Unity, the armed opposition movement with whom the government had finally signed a peace agreement in December 1996. The peace agreement provided for the establishment of a Historical Clarification Commission, to which REMHI's findings are to be submitted.

Auxiliary Archbishop Gerardi had been an important force behind both the REMHI Project and in the establishment of ODHAG itself in the late 1980s. Prior to that, he had served as Bishop in Quiché, a heavily indigenous department of Guatemala which had been one the areas hardest hit by the Guatemalan army's counter-insurgency campaign of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Those in the church like the then Bishop Gerardi who attempted to denounce the violations, including massive extrajudicial executions being suffered by non-combatant civilians at the hands of the army were often subjected to threats and violations themselves. In just one 18 month period in the early 1980s, 13 priests were killed. Such abuses moved Bishop Gerardi and all other church personnel to withdraw from Quiché entirely for a period during the 1980s.

Amnesty International believes that, in the interest of building a true and lasting peace in Guatemala, a complete in-depth investigation into the circumstances surrounding Auxiliary Archbishop Gerardi's death must be an absolute priority for the Guatemalan authorities at this tragic moment for all Guatemalans.

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