

EXTERNAL

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Fear for safety

29 May 1997

**GUATEMALA Relatives of victims of 1980s killings, involved in exhumation of clandestine cemetery**

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Relatives of victims and witnesses of killings perpetrated by the Guatemalan army between 1980 and 1982 in the department of El Quiché have been the subject of death threats and intimidation, allegedly by former members of civil defence patrols and former military commissioners.

Exhumation of a clandestine cemetery in the grounds of the church of San Andrés Sajcabaja, El Quiché department, began at the end of April 1997. Since then at least two relatives of victims have suffered direct death threats and intimidation. Others have received indirect threats.

At 3pm, on 25 April 1997, a few days after the exhumations began, the mother of one of the indigenous people killed by the army in 1982, was walking at the crossroad between San Andrés Sajcabajá and the village of Chukuxb. She was approached by a former military commissioner. He asked her what she was doing there and she replied that she had come to see the dead. The man then began to threaten her, saying, "You are working with the guerrilla women. You can be 20 and 30 women but I can kill you with a gun or *machete*. Just wait until all the people who are with you have gone, then will see what we can do: your life is mine, *-Ustedes están trabajando con las mujeres guerrilleras, aunque sean 20 o 30 mujeres las voy a matar con pistola o machete, te esperas un poco a que se vaya toda la gente que te acompaña y después veremos que vamos a hacer, tu vida es mía-*.

The United Nation Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) received a formal complaint about the threats against the woman and the local Public Ministry was also informed. The woman concerned is a member of the *Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (CONAVIGUA)*, National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows, a well-known national human rights organization.

On 15 May 1997, the same woman was told through other persons to go to the house of the former military commissioner who had previously threatened her, to talk with him. She refused to do so.

Also in May, another woman, whose husband had been killed by the army in the 1980s in San Andrés Sajcabaja, was indirectly threatened by one of the former members of the *Comités Voluntarios de Defensa Civil, (CVDCs)*, Voluntary Civil Defence Committees. He told someone to pass the message to her that if she continued with the exhumations and he was accused of being involved in the killings, then sooner or later he would have revenge. The woman refused to make a formal complaint for fear of reprisals.

Local people have told Amnesty International that unknown individuals visited the site of the exhumations on several occasions in May.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned for the safety of witnesses to the massacres and that of the victims' relatives: exhumations have been temporarily stopped and the women have been left alone, living at close quarters with the people who allegedly threatened them.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Following hundreds of massacres of civilians by the Guatemalan army during counter-insurgency operations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, thousands of corpses, the majority those of Mayan peasants farmers, were thrown, unidentified, into unmarked graves. According to current estimates, there are over 500 clandestine cemeteries in the country, few of which have been excavated. Renewed efforts to exhume those killed continue to be thwarted by constant death threats against relatives and others involved in the exhumations.

The civil defence patrols, comprising some 300,000 armed men under the control of the army, were set up in the 1980s, and together with the military commissioners, were responsible for innumerable human rights violations. The disbanding of the CVDCs began in August 1996 and was expected to have been completed by the end of that year.

However positive the disbanding of the military commissioners, in September 1995, and the CVDCs - to the extent that it eliminates from state structures the army auxiliary bodies responsible for serious human rights violations - it is nonetheless of concern that former military commissioners and CVDC members continue to commit serious human rights violations with the guaranteed protection of the army. Nor has demobilization resulted in investigations into human rights violations. The majority of human rights violations committed by the CVDCs and military commissioners in the past have gone unpunished.

In many cases, former CVDC members and military commissioners, who are allegedly responsible for killings, live in the same community or town as their victims' families, or in neighbouring areas.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:**

- expressing concern for the safety of those involved in the exhumation of the clandestine cemetery in San Andrés Sajcabajá, El Quiché department;
- calling for immediate and adequate measures to guarantee the safety of those involved in the exhumation;
- calling for an immediate and thorough investigation into the reported threats and intimidation, and urging that those responsible be brought to justice.

**APPEALS TO:**

1) President of the Republic  
 S.E. Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen  
 Presidente de la República de Guatemala  
 Palacio Nacional,  
 6ª Calle y 7ª Avenida, Zona 1  
 Guatemala, GUATEMALA  
**Fax: +502 221 4537**  
**Telegrams: Presidente, Guatemala, GUATEMALA**  
**Salutation: Sr. Presidente /Dear President**

2) Minister of Interior  
 Lic. Rodolfo Mendoza  
 Ministro de Gobernación  
 Ministerio de Gobernación  
 Despacho Ministerial, Of. N° 8

Palacio Nacional  
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**Tel: +502 221 4428 Ext.1500**  
**Fax: +502 251 5368**  
**Telegrams: Ministro del Interior, Guatemala, GUATEMALA**  
**Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister**

3) Departmental Governor  
Sr. Miguel Medrano Bulux  
Gobernador Departamental  
Santa Cruz de El Quiché  
El Quiché GUATEMALA  
**Telefax: +502 755 1433**  
**Telegrams: Gobernador Departamental de El Quiche, Guatemala**  
**Salutation: Sr. Gobernador / Dear Governor**

**COPIES TO:**

1) Presidential Human Rights Commission  
COPREDEH  
Licda. Marta Altolaquirre  
Sra. Presidenta de la Comisión Presidencial  
Coordinadora de la Política del Ejecutivo en Materia  
de Derechos Humanos  
15 Avenida 18-38, Zona 13  
Guatemala , GUATEMALA  
**Fax: +502 334 1615/334 1407**

2) Human rights organization  
CONAVIGUA  
8 Avenida 2-29  
Zona 1  
Guatemala, GUATEMALA  
**Tel/fax: +502 232 5642**

and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat,  
or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 July 1997.