

AI Index: PRE 01/153/2011
23 March 2011

Guatemala forcibly evicting indigenous farmers

The Guatemalan authorities should halt the forced evictions of indigenous farming communities which have so far left 2,500 people homeless and resulted in the death of one man, Amnesty International said today.

According to reports security forces used tear gas during the evictions of 12 Q'eqchi' farming communities from disputed land in Valle del Polochic in the north east of the country between 15 and 18 March.

Antonio Beb Ac, a farm worker, was killed during the evictions and two people allegedly suffered from health complications caused by the tear gas. Another two communities numbering some 300 people are said to be at risk of forced evictions.

"The evictions in Valle del Polochic have so far been carried out without adequate consultation, adequate notice or the provision of adequate alternative housing and they must stop immediately," said Sebastian Elgueta, Guatemala researcher at Amnesty International.

"Thousands of people have lost their homes and livelihoods. Without shelter, food or water they are vulnerable to further abuses and must be protected by the authorities. The 60 or so families that are still at risk of eviction must also be protected."

"The authorities must also ensure that the investigation into the death of Antonio Beb Ac is impartial and thorough with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice "

A judge issued the eviction order for the 14 communities on 7 February 2011. This followed a dispute over ownership of the land between a local company who claims ownership of the land and the Q'eqchi' people who say they have been living and working on the land for 30 years.

On 14 March, members of the indigenous communities met the authorities to try and resolve the dispute. The next day the police and army started the forced evictions reportedly without any prior notice or warning, clearing the Miralvalle and Agua Caliente farms.

On 16 March the Quinich farm was razed to the ground. On 17 March and 18 March, nine more communities were evicted, including two reportedly carried out by mistake.

Sixty families (some 300 people) in the San Miguelito and Campanas communities- are still at risk of being forcibly evicted.

On 17 March the Office of the Presidency issued a communiqué stating that they will carry out all eviction orders with immediate effect, but failed to specify that they would do this in compliance with international law.

Amnesty International said it is concerned that forced evictions could take place, as they have in the past, without consulting with affected communities or providing them with adequate alternative housing.

"Human rights must be respected for all people. The Guatemalan authorities must ensure that the most vulnerable, indigenous communities as well as others who are marginalized, have their civil, economic, social, political and cultural rights protected," said Sebastian Elgueta.

"Unless the human rights of the marginalized are taken as a priority by the government, the application of the rule of law in Guatemala will continue to discriminate against Indigenous Peoples and be skewed in favour of large landowners."