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El Salvador: Ineffective investigation into elderly couple's killing signals danger for activists

By failing to effectively investigate the brutal killing of a couple of elderly political activists a year ago, authorities in El Salvador are opening the door for more attacks against those who dare to criticise the government, said Amnesty International today.

Francisco Antonio Manzanares, 77, and Juana Monjarás de Manzanares, 75, were found dead in their home in Cuscatlán on 2 July 2006. According to reports, the couple had their throats cut, their faces had been sprinkled with lime and there were signs that someone had tried to burn their bodies and destroy the crime scene. Reports also noted that all valuables were still in the house, which shows that the attack was not related to a robbery.

The Manzanares Monjarás family has been involved in political activity for decades as members of the opposition party Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). The killing of Francisco and Juana came after years of threats against them and their daughter Marina due to their political activities. Before she was murdered, Juana received a box with bones and a note saying that she was going to be receiving the remains of her daughter soon.

On 8 October 1996, the couple's son, Francisco, was also violently killed in circumstances that suggested he was killed for his political activities. Marina is still being threatened.

"How far does the violence against political activists in El Salvador have to go for the authorities to take notice?," said Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

"The brutal killings of Francisco and Juana show all the signs of the death squads that operated in El Salvador during the 1980's, which local organizations fear have resurfaced. The government's response also mirrors the years of impunity that have followed the end of the armed conflict."

In a letter sent to El Salvador's Attorney General in March 2007, Amnesty International requested further details about what investigations have been carried out into the killings of Francisco and Juana and regarding any protective measures for Marina Manzanares. More than three months later, Amnesty International has not received a response.

Amnesty International calls on authorities in El Salvador to urgently accelerate investigations into the killings of Francisco and Juana Manzanares and to develop measures to protect political activists

"Authorities in El Salvador must live up to their human rights commitments by respecting and protecting the work of political activists. Without dissent, democracy is stifled."

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