

PUBLIC

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UA 335/02

Fear for safety/possible political killing

12 November 2002

GUATEMALA

Members of the *Comité de Desarrollo Campesino* (CODECA), Committee for Campesino Development

Killed:

Erasmó Sánchez Lapop (m) farmer and land activist

Erasmó Sánchez Lapop, an indigenous land activist in the south western department of Suchitepéquez, was murdered after organising farmers to defend their communal land rights. Other members of the *Comité de Desarrollo Campesino* (CODECA), Committee for Campesino Development have received written death threats. Amnesty International fears they may be in grave danger.

On 3 November at approximately 4pm two men pulled up in a car with tinted windows and shot Erasmó Sánchez Lapop dead. His wife, who was nearby, recognised the two men and called the police, who detained them. Amnesty International believes there are strong indications that it was a politically motivated killing and that the men may have been paid to carry out the killing.

Erasmó Sánchez Lapop belonged to a Maya K'iche community of 125 families. On August 2001, they purchased and settled on the *Nueva Cabrican* plantation, Mazatenango, in the department of Suchitepéquez. The community purchased the land through *Fontierras*, a government land trust created to provide land for the impoverished and displaced populations. However, since their settlement on the land, the community has been in conflict with the local mayor, among others, over the ownership of the land. Erasmó Sánchez Lapop, together with 12 other community members, all members of CODECA, have organised the farmers to defend their communal land rights. Erasmó Sánchez Lapop was reportedly the most active organiser. He had received several anonymous death threats. Two months prior to his death, he received what was to be his last threat; a letter containing a bullet which has reportedly since been identified as belonging to someone close to the mayor.

Since September 2002, residents of the New Cabrican plantation and CODECA members began receiving threatening letters. In an apparent attempt to divide the community, the letters reportedly bore the signature of a specific member of the Board of Directors of CODECA.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This killing occurs in the context of increased violence against land rights activists in Guatemala (see UA 200/02, AMR 34/041/2002, 2 July and further information AMR 34/049/2002, 15 August; UA 205/02, AMR 34/042/2002, 8 July 2002).

The 1996 *Accord on Socio-Economic issues and the Agrarian Situation*, an important part of the 1996 Peace Accords, stipulated the distribution of unused national lands and the creation of social funds to buy lands for landless peasant farmers. Despite this, the Guatemalan government has shown little political will to fully implement this important element of the Peace Accords. Increasingly desperate groups of peasant farmers in several Guatemalan departments, have taken to occupying lands or refusing to vacate other plots which they believe they have the right to cultivate. Peasant farmers are frequently forcibly removed from the land by police or landowners' private security. For example, on 31 October, some 80 families, who had been occupying the San Miguel plantation in the municipality of El Estor, department of Izabal, were forcibly

evicted, leaving two injured. The peasant farmers fear police complicity in the land eviction. Similarly on 7 November some 2000 peasant farmers clashed with police as the police attempted to remove them from the San José los Encuentros plantation in Nueva Palmar, Quetzaltenango.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of members of *Comité de Desarrollo Campesino* (CODECA), Committee for Campesino Development who have recently received anonymous death threats;
- urging the authorities to take immediate measures to guarantee their safety;
- calling on the government to investigate the murder of Erasmo Sánchez Lapop, to make the results public and bring those responsible to justice;
- urging the authorities to take action to peacefully resolve the land disputes in the New Cabrican plantation and other communities throughout Guatemala, to prevent further human rights violations.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic of Guatemala

Lic. Alfonso Portillo Cabrera

Presidente de la República de Guatemala

6ª Avenida "A" 4-41, Zona 1, Guatemala,
Guatemala

Telegram: Presidente de la República de Guatemala, Guatemala City, Guatemala

Fax: +502 253 0801 (please keep trying this number)

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente

Attorney General

Lic. Carlos David de León Argueta

Fiscal General de la República

Fiscalía General del Ministerio Público

8a. Avenida 10-57, Tercer nivel, Zona 1

Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Telegram: Fiscal General de la República,
Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 221 2718

Salutation: Señor Fiscal / Dear Sir

Director of Land Trust

Lic. Sergio Funes

Fontierras

7 Avenida 8-92, Zona 9

Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Telegram: Director de Fontierras, Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Fax: + 502 334 6373 (if someone answers say "me podría dar tono de fax por favor")

Salutation: Dear Director / Señor Director

COPIES TO:

News Agency

CERIGUA

2a calle 1-42, Zona 1

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 221 2521

Peasant organisation

Comité de Desarrollo Campesino (CODECA)

10 Calle, 5-39, Prolongación

Cantón Santa Cristina, Zona 2
Mazatenango, Suchitepéquez
Guatemala

Telefax: +502 872 1545 (if someone answers say “me podría dar tono de fax por favor”

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 24 December 202.