

News Service: 70/98

AI INDEX: AMR 13/09/98

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 11:00 HRS BUENOS AIRES (1600 GMT) 8 MAY 1998**

## **Argentina: Journalists under threat -- Occupational hazard or the death of freedom of expression?**

**Buenos Aires** -- Violence against journalists in Argentina seems to have escalated to a worrying degree during the last two years, seriously jeopardizing freedom of expression, Amnesty International delegates said today at the end of a research visit to the country.

During a meeting with the media -- to discuss the results of government talks and present a new report on human rights violations against members of the press -- Federico Andreu and Virginia Shopée from the organization's International Secretariat, stressed that the prevailing climate of intimidation may lead to a self-imposed censorship, which could in turn seriously damage human rights protection in Argentina.

Since the beginning of the 90's, when hundreds of cases of death threats, physical attacks and other forms of intimidation were reported, violence against journalists has continued and, following the murder of press photographer José Luis Cabezas in January 1997, several incidents have been linked to press reports on the killing and the investigation initiated into his death.

The Amnesty International report details 33 cases including that of Santo Biasatti, a well-known radio and TV journalist who has received repeated anonymous messages telling him he will suffer "the same fate as Cabezas" or that "the one to suffer the most will be your grand-daughter".

In another incident, María José Fernández Llorente, sister of a journalist covering the investigation into the killing of José Luis Cabezas for Channel 13, was attacked by three men who cut her hand twice with a flick-knife. She was warned that if her brother did not stop his investigative journalism into the case, "his family would pay the consequences".

The following day, Magdalena Ruíz Guiñazú, a well know radio and TV journalist, received four telephone messages by anonymous callers telling her she would be "the next one". A 38-calibre bullet was later left at her door.

"Attacks and harassment have become occupational hazards for journalists in Argentina," Amnesty International said. "These 'hazards' are totally unacceptable. The authorities should make sure that journalists can do investigative reporting -- a legitimate media role -- without suffering human rights violations."

According to reports, the Buenos Aires Press Workers Union has recorded more than 113 cases of threats against journalists. The alarming overall feature has been the lack of appropriate investigations. In most of the cases examined in the Amnesty International report, no official complaints have been initiated, and the incidents remain unclarified, despite official complaints having been presented before the relevant authorities.

While in some of the cases temporary police protection has been provided, the lack of effective action to protect journalists and their work has created a climate of scepticism about the ability or willingness of the authorities to protect members of the press, and to safeguard their right to carry out their work.

Lawyers doing press or broadcasting work on social, legal or human rights issues -- as well as providing counsel to victims of police violence -- have also come under repeated threats and other forms of harassment. A case in point is that of Daniel Stragá, journalist and legal representative for a number of families which have been victims of police violence. A telephone message left at his office gave an accurate description of his car, adding Stragá would be shot in the head, placed in his car-boot and set on fire -- a threat mirroring some features of the Cabezas killing.

“The current failure by the Argentine authorities to properly investigate these incidents and bring those responsible to justice could encourage the perpetrators to continue -- thus leading to further harassment against the media,” the Amnesty International delegates stressed.

The human rights organization is therefore recommending that the Government of Argentina make public declarations recognizing the rights of those in the media to have their physical integrity assured as they carry out their legitimate and important work.

Amnesty International also called on the authorities to:

- conduct full investigations into all complaints, and cooperate with those already initiated -- so that administrative obstacles do not hamper their completion;
- make public the methods followed during the course of their investigations and their outcome;
- bring to justice those responsible;
- guarantee the protection of members of the media and their families, and
- guarantee the right to reparation for the victims and their relatives.

ENDS.../

\*\*\*\*\*

**For further information or to arrange an interview with the delegates, please contact Amnesty International, Argentina Section on +541 331 5854, or Soraya Bermejo, Amnesty International Press Office in London, on +44 171 4135562**