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EL SALVADOR

@Killing of trade unionist Nazario de Jesús Gracia

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Nazario de Jesús Gracia, 34-year-old nightwatchman (**guardián**) of the *Federación de Asociaciones y Sindicatos Independientes de El Salvador (FEASIES)*, the Federation of Independent Associations and Trade Unions of El Salvador, was found murdered on the morning of 2 March 1992 at the FEASIES offices in San Salvador. Although responsibility for his murder cannot be attributed with certainty, Amnesty International is concerned at indications that this may have been a politically motivated extrajudicial execution carried out by so-called "death squads" with the possible involvement of members of the security forces.

FEASIES members arriving for work at the office at 8am found the body of Nazario de Jesús Gracia lying on a mattress soaked in blood. His throat had been slit and there were deep cuts on the back of his head, his neck, face, shoulders and chest. Wounds on his hands, including a severed finger, suggested that he had struggled to defend himself. According to preliminary forensic investigations, the wounds appeared to have been inflicted with a machete. He had been blindfolded and there was a strip of cloth intertwined in his fingers, indicating his thumbs may at one point have been tied. There were no witnesses to the attack, which appeared to have taken place around 4am. Nothing appeared to have been stolen from the offices. Neighbours commented that in the three days prior to the killing a large contingent of uniformed police had been present in the vicinity and had been patrolling the area the day before the killing.

Other aspects of the context in which the killing occurred suggest the possible involvement of members of the armed forces. In October 1991, Nazario de Jesús Gracia had given a testimony to the **Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (CDHES)**, the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, in which he stated that he feared for his physical safety and that of his family, after being threatened during

interrogation by the National Police. He had been arrested on 21 October on his return from a trade union demonstration and held for three days by the National Police, who had accused him of belonging to the armed opposition group **Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)**, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. He had been released without charge on 24 October, but claimed his interrogators had threatened to find him and his family wherever he went.

Nazario de Jesús Gracia was a regional representative of the **Asociación Sindical de Trabajadores del Instituto Regulador de Abastecimientos (ASTIRA)**, the Workers Association of the Basic Foodstuffs Regulating Institute, which for several months had been protesting against the mass dismissal of over a thousand ASTIRA workers in August 1991. According to FEASIES (of which ASTIRA is a member), in the weeks prior to his death Nazario de Jesús Gracia had been involved in a lawsuit brought by ASTIRA against the Ministry of Agriculture over the Ministry's apparent failure to provide compensation to the dismissed workers. In the months following the dismissals and ASTIRA's protests, FEASIES received anonymous telephonic and written threats.

FEASIES immediately notified the authorities of the murder of their colleague. Human rights investigators from the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) and a local justice of the peace arrived at the offices within hours, and the body was taken to the Forensic Institute for a medical examination, which recorded 16 wounds, including several cuts of over 10cms in length. Detectives of the governmental **Comisión Investigadora de Hechos Delictivos (CIDH)**, the Criminal Investigations Commission which carries out preliminary forensic investigations in certain cases, reportedly only arrived on the scene some 14 hours after the killing.

While the identity of the perpetrators is not yet known, Amnesty International is concerned that the circumstances of the murder of Nazario de Jesús Gracia are reminiscent of hundreds of "death squad" style killings believed to have been carried out in previous years by members of the armed forces or agents linked to them. Amnesty International believes such practices have effectively been allowed to continue over the years because the perpetrators have rarely been held to account. **The organization is urging the Salvadorian authorities to carry out an immediate and exhaustive investigation into the killing of Nazario de Jesús Gracia and to bring to justice those responsible, so as to ensure that such killings are prevented from recurring.**

BACKGROUND

In January 1992 the government and the FMLN signed a definitive peace accord ending the 12-year armed conflict. Since the accord FEASIES and other union organizations claim that the authorities and representatives of the business sector have repeatedly accused the unions of being in league with the FMLN and of supporting what they claim is the FMLN's current policy of destabilization and promoting unrest.

The peace accord resulted in numerous agreements on reforms aimed at protecting human rights. March 2 was to have marked a key date in the process of reform; two security force units were dismantled and most political prisoners were due to be released under an amnesty law. However, the murder of Nazario de Jesús Gracia indicates the

urgent need to take effective measures to ensure that the human rights related agreements are complied with in practice.

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