

EXTERNAL

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MEDICAL CONCERN

**Death threats against an AIDS worker
EL SALVADOR**

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Wilfredo Valencia Palacios, deputy director of the Oscar Romero AIDS project in El Salvador who has recently been the subject of death threats. The Oscar Romero AIDS project is a non-governmental organization established in April 1993 which conducts preventive education and health work with male and female prostitutes and transvestites in the poorer areas of the capital San Salvador.

In late October and early November Wilfredo Valencia Palacios received a series of threats. The first occurred on 29 October when he is reported to have been stopped in the street by two unidentified men in civilian clothes who beat him up while telling him that his work was "against God's designs" and that if AIDS did not kill the "faggots", they would do. They warned him not to come back to the area, otherwise he would be a "dead man".

A week later, on 5 November, Wilfredo Valencia Palacios was again stopped by two unidentified men when returning from the area of San Salvador known as the *Mercado Público* where the project's main street education work is centred. The two men showed him a box of condoms and demanded to know whether he was the one responsible for distributing them. He replied that he was and that this was part of the project's programme to control the spread of AIDS. On hearing his reply, the two men reminded him of their initial warning. When one of the men made a movement as though to remove something from his jacket, Wilfredo Valencia Palacios fled and his escape was followed by a number of gunshots from the assailants. Later that day Wilfredo Valencia Palacios noticed that he was being followed by a vehicle. Two men alighted and warned him that if he did not leave the country within 30 days, he would be killed. After this last threat, Wilfredo Valencia Palacios went into hiding for a while, but he is now back with the project carrying out his work.

A formal complaint about the threats was brought before the National Procurator for Human Rights and the United Nations Verification Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL). To Amnesty International's knowledge, this is the first time an AIDS worker in El Salvador has brought a formal complaint about death threats. Amnesty International regards the episode as a very disturbing development in a country known for its recent past history of "death squads". Since the end of the war in January 1992 there have been continued reports of death squad activity, albeit on a different scale than in previous years. Although the identity of Wilfredo Valencia's two assailants is at present unknown, they would appear to belong to an anti-gay death squad. The project believes it was targeted because it is identified as working with homosexual men.

Death squads in El Salvador

Death squads, largely made up of police and military personnel, were an instrument of large-scale governmental repression against the opposition during El Salvador's armed conflict. Although the end of the conflict in 1992 brought radical reforms to the police and army, clandestine structures carrying out death squad-style killings appear to have persisted.

A UN-appointed commission known as the *Grupo Conjunto*, which was set up to investigate the politically-motivated activities of illegal armed groups, presented its report in July 1994. This concluded that organized groups involved in political violence continued to operate, although their relation to state structures was more obscure than those of the death squads of the past. Both the *Grupo Conjunto* and ONUSAL consider that the nature and activities of these groups are different from those of the death squads during the war. Rather than acting as organized instruments of political repression under senior military command, these groups appear to be responsible for "private justice", the settling of old political scores and "social cleansing" operations against marginalized sectors of society. Many of these groups are composed of former or current members of the army or police, as well as in some cases ex-combatants of the former armed opposition.

The *Grupo Conjunto* stated that although it had concluded its mission in El Salvador, the death-squad chapter was still not closed and it reminded the authorities of its responsibility to continue investigating and bringing to justice those involved in such activities. It also stated that such responsibility now falls on the Attorney-General's Office and on the *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC), National Civilian Police.

The Oscar Romero AIDS project

The Oscar Romero AIDS project began its outreach work in the *Mercado Público* area - one of the most depressed and dangerous parts of the capital - in July 1994. The project also works with the country's only HIV clinic, FUNDASIDA, and has provided the clinic with supplies of medicines. Its main area of work, however, remains outreach work with marginalized communities in the shanty towns. The project is planning to establish a house for people with HIV and AIDS, although the timing and development of this project is dependent on the outcome of a grant application and on whether threats such as those against Wilfredo Valencia Palacios recur. The project estimates that 38% of the prostitute population in the areas in which it works are HIV positive. Their health needs are great and the project is the only health agency in the country working directly with them. The project is committed to continuing its work despite the recent threats.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to urgently investigate the death threats against Wilfredo Valencia Palacios and to bring to justice those found responsible. It is appealing to the Salvadorean government to ensure his physical safety and that of all those involved in work related to education and dissemination of information on the prevention of AIDS.

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To: Medical professionals
From: Medical Office / Research Department - Americas
Date: 16 December 1994

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

**Death threats against AIDS worker
EL SALVADOR**

Keywords

Theme: death threats/AIDS

Summary

In late October/early November Wilfredo Valencia Palacios was the subject of death threats directly related to his work with an AIDS agency involved in street education campaigns. The threats were designed to impede and disrupt the work of the agency which works in the shanty towns of the capital. There is concern for his safety and for that of all those engaged in similar work in El Salvador. Please see the details attached.

Recommended Actions

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses below:

- expressing concern at the death threats and attack against Wilfredo Valencia Palacios
- asking that measures be taken to guarantee his safety and that of all those working with AIDS groups in the country
- calling on the authorities to make clear their condemnation of the threats and calling for a prompt, impartial and thorough investigation which results in those found responsible being brought to justice
- asking what steps have been taken to implement the recommendations of the *Grupo Conjunto* with regard to the eradication of "dead squad"-style groups.

Addresses

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and to diplomatic representatives of El Salvador accredited to your country