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Guatemala: New President should fulfill his London human rights promises

Amnesty International today congratulated Alfonso Portillo on his inauguration as Guatemala's new President, but urged him to deliver on the many human rights promises he has made -- including those expressed to the organization during a meeting in London last March.

During his 1999 presidential campaign, Mr. Portillo promised:

to respect human rights -- including indigenous rights;
to establish a firm schedule for reactivation of the peace process agreed in the 1996 Peace Accords;
to take steps against impunity -- including via reform of Guatemala's ailing judicial system;
to ensure citizen security, by taking a firm line against crime, including lynchings.

Mr. Portillo also publicly lamented the continuing violence in Guatemala and held the incumbent government of President Arzú responsible.

"We hope he'll fulfil his campaign promises and remember his words on violence. We also hope he will take steps to put an end to the widespread corruption in the judiciary and the involvement of government, army and police officials in illegal activities which have done so much to lessen the faith of the ordinary citizen in the rule of law and so contributed to the violence," the human rights organization said.

Since his election in the December second round, Guatemala's new President has also publicly promised:
to press for clarification of the 1998 murder of human rights leader Bishop Juan José Gerardi;
to see that the Presidential General Staff (the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* -- which has functioned as the army high command) is disbanded.

Amnesty International welcomed these undertakings by the new President, but reminded him that during his March meeting with the organization, he also said that he had "always" opposed the death penalty, and that he did not want the pact of San José to be abrogated -- as in effect it would be, should further executions be carried out in Guatemala for crimes not covered by it when Guatemala ratified the Pact.

"Mr. Portillo also assured us that he would make his opposition to the death penalty known during his campaign, and would be willing to participate in anti-death penalty events in Guatemala," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe, Amnesty International Researcher on Guatemala.

"Following his election however, Mr. Portillo has been widely quoted as saying he would not exercise his prerogative of presidential pardon for Guatemalans on death row."

Amnesty International -- which opposes the death penalty in all circumstances -- is further concerned that many of those facing capital punishment in Guatemala were convicted after proceedings which fell far short of international standards for fair trial and due process.

"Furthermore, a number of those condemned are said to suffer mental or learning disabilities. International standards view the death penalty as inappropriate for the mentally impaired," said Tracy Ulltveit-Moe.

"We strongly urge Mr Portillo to exercise his prerogative to grant presidential pardons to those condemned to death, including the mentally impaired."

At the March meeting with Mr Portillo, Amnesty International reminded him that during the second round of the 1995 presidential elections Mr. Portillo had pressed Mr Arzú -- the eventual winner -- as to whether if elected, he would acknowledge and pursue human rights abuses carried out by previous administrations with which Mr. Arzú had been associated. Amnesty International is urging Mr Portillo to ensure that what he asked of President Arzú actually happens during his own administration.

"Politicians the world over often change their tunes once elected. We think it is the responsibility of the international community to ensure that Alfonso Portillo actually delivers on what he promised to the Guatemalan electorate," stressed Tracy Ulltveit-Moe

"Amnesty International will be looking to see what specific programs he proposes to implement his promises because we think progress on human rights issues is essential to strengthen democracy and build the lasting peace promised in the Peace Accords. We think all donor countries and institutions should do the same."

"During his visit to our London offices, Mr Portillo also said that if elected, he would always be available for continued discussions with us on issues of mutual concern. We will be seeking a meeting with Mr. Portillo at his earliest convenience to discuss the steps he should take to improve Guatemala's human rights situation," Tracy Ulltveit-Moe concluded.

Background

General Efraín Ríos Montt, a powerful figure in the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) -- the political party which fielded Mr. Portillo as its victorious 1999 presidential candidate -- presided in the 1980s over one of the worst periods of political repression in Guatemala, when tens of thousands of indigenous Guatemalans were extrajudicially executed at the hands of the Guatemalan army.

Most of these crimes have never been investigated and efforts to exhume the mass graves in which many of the victims were clandestinely buried have, up till now, been systematically obstructed by successive Guatemalan administrations. In the 1999 elections, General Ríos Montt was a successful FRG candidate for the Guatemalan Congress, and he is expected to be chosen as its president.

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