

**GUATEMALA** Mons. Juan José Gerardi Conadera

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The brutal murder of Juan Gerardi Conadera, Auxiliary Bishop of Guatemala, and the Coordinator of the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala (ODHAG), in Guatemala City on 26 April 1998 threatens the peace process and the work of all human rights defenders in Guatemala.

Bishop Gerardi was battered to death with a piece of paving stone by unknown assailants as he returned to his home in the capital after a dinner with relatives; his face was so disfigured by the attack that he was only identifiable by his bishop's ring. There was apparently no evidence of robbery.

His death came only two days after he had presided over presentation of the report of an inter-diocesan project on Recuperation of the Historical Memory (REMHI). This is a study based on more than 55,000 testimonies concerning the tens of thousands of human rights violations suffered by non-combatant civilians during the civil conflict which ravaged the country for more than three decades. The REMHI report synthesized testimonies of victims and witnesses to these violations collected over a three year period and identified the army as responsible for some 90% of the abuses investigated. It also laid a number of past abuses against civilians at the door of the United National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), the armed opposition movement with whom the government finally signed a peace agreement in December 1996. The peace agreement provided for the establishment of a Historical Clarification Commission, to which REMHI's findings are to be submitted.

The Guatemalan army has denied involvement in Mons. Gerardi's murder and the government has promised a full inquiry -- to be undertaken by a joint commission made up of government officials and representatives of the Archbishopric. The timing of his death, however, so soon after the REMHI report was made public, has led to fears that his murderers may have been acting on behalf of sectors who want to prevent the identification and prosecution of those responsible for abuses perpetrated during Guatemala's dirty war.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Mons. Gerardi had been a long-term human rights advocate. His commitment was first evidenced during the years he served as Bishop in the Verapaces in the 1960s and 70s, where he witnessed at first hand the suffering of the local indigenous population. He then became Bishop of El Quiché, another heavily indigenous department, and one of the areas hardest hit by the Guatemalan army's counter-insurgency campaign of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

During that period, those in the church like Bishop Gerardi who attempted to denounce the violations, including massive extrajudicial executions of non-combatant civilians by the army, were often subjected to threats and violations. In just one 18 month period in the early 1980s, 13 priests were killed. Bishop Gerardi himself received death threats and escaped an attempted ambush. Such abuses moved Bishop Gerardi and all other church personnel to withdraw from El Quiché entirely for a period during the 1980s. Bishop Gerardi was himself forced into exile for several years when he was forbidden re-entry into Guatemala.

More recently, Bishop Gerardi had been an important force behind both the REMHI Project and the establishment of ODHAG itself, in 1989.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/emails/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:**

- noting that, until clarified, the international community considers that the killing of Bishop Gerardi on 26 April 1998, represents a threat to the historical clarification process in Guatemala and hence to the peace process itself, as well as to the work of all human rights defenders who will feel under threat until this murder is fully investigated and those responsible for both ordering and carrying it out are brought to justice;
- insisting therefore, that a genuine, transparent and public inquiry be immediately initiated into the circumstances of Bishop Gerardi's death and that its' findings be made public;
- asking also for immediate and effective guarantees for the security of all those involved in human rights defence and the historical clarification process.

**APPEALS TO:**

President of the Republic of Guatemala  
 S.E. Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen  
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**Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President**

Minister of Foreign Relations  
 Sr. Eduardo Stein  
 Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores  
 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores  
 Palacio Nacional  
 6ª Calle y 7ª Avenida, Zona 1  
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**Telegrams: Ministro Relaciones Exteriores, Guatemala, Guatemala**  
**Faxes: + 502 251 8445**  
**Salutation: Señor Ministro / Dear Minister**

Private Secretary to the President  
 Sr. Gustavo Porras  
 Secretario Privado del Presidente de la República  
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 Ciudad de Guatemala , GUATEMALA

**Telegrams: Gustavo Porras, Guatemala, Guatemala**  
**Salutation: Señor Secretario / Dear Secretary**

**COPIES TO:**

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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 12 June 1998.