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Guatemala: Violence against land activists must stop

Recent months have seen an increase in the harassment of and violence towards peasant leaders, which is part of a growing wave of intimidation and violence directed at the peasant movement in the capital and in rural areas, declared Amnesty International

“The intensity of such threats is escalating, whilst the problems of land scarcity and unequal distribution of land are becoming increasingly serious. This is taking place in a national context characterised by a crisis in the coffee sector, and poverty and hunger in rural areas.”

In recent months, Daniel Pascual, Juan Tiney, Rafael Chanchavac Cux, Gilberto Atz and Elizabeth Cabrera have suffered death threats, assaults, burglaries and intimidation. They have had their mobile phones stolen as well as important documentation related to most of the cases on which their organisations have been working.

“The Guatemalan government must adopt urgent and effective measures to stop these continuous acts of violence and intimidation of peasant activists,” declared Amnesty International.

“The growing wave of violence and intimidation against the members of peasant organizations, which has included extrajudicial executions, as well as the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of these acts, are clear violations of civil and political rights.”

The lack of wide-ranging and effective investigations and subsequent convictions weaken the credibility and capacity of the institutions responsible for administering justice and represent a direct threat to the rule of law,” the organization added.

Historically, peasant activists have been targets of repression and violence. Activists have supported peasant communities in their attempts to reclaim or maintain possession of land they consider to be theirs by law. These groups also pressure for the implementation of rights pertaining to land ownership, including those stipulated in the 1996 Peace Accords.

The leaders and members of the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), Committee of Peasant Unity; the Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina (CONIC), National Indigenous and Peasant Co-ordination; and the Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (CNOC), National Co-ordination of Peasant Organizations have been persecuted since they were created because of their work on land distribution.

In addition, Daniel Pascual, Juan Tiney and Gilberto Atz, and three other national peasant leaders are facing legal proceedings after being accused of inciting the illegal seizure of land and “aggravated illegal seizure” by the Chamber of Agriculture. Amnesty International is concerned about the possibility of politically motivated criminal charges and judicial orders being made in this case.

Amnesty International has urged the government to guarantee the security of all peasants and peasant activists working on land distribution issues. It has also asked for assurances that land conflicts will be resolved quickly and equitably. The actions of the security forces when dealing with land problems, for example, land evictions, must respect those rights set out in the Constitution.

“If the government really wants to reduce the increasing wave of violence against the peasant population, it must implement those components of the peace accords relating to access to land and formulate an integrated rural policy. In this way, and only in this way, will it be able to deal with the discrimination and the social, political and cultural marginalization that prevent rural social and economic development and that contribute to the culture of violence and impunity,” said Amnesty International.

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