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## **EMBARGOED FOR 9 SEPTEMBER 1999**

### **Guatemala: A challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Candidates in Guatemala's presidential elections have within their reach a unique opportunity to address the wrongs of the past and strengthen democracy, Amnesty International said today.

In a letter sent to candidates in the November elections, the human rights organization called on them to propose a human rights program designed to protect the fundamental rights of all Guatemalans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"Healing the wounds of the past by ensuring justice for past human rights violations and taking real measures to prevent new ones will finally enable Guatemala to deal with its troubled past and properly invest in its people's future," Amnesty International said.

"It is a major challenge for all Guatemalan presidential candidates to tell their own electorate and the international community exactly how they intend to achieve these essential goals."

In its letter, Amnesty International makes several recommendations, stressing that all candidates should make their concrete proposals public.

Tackling impunity for human rights abuses should be the absolute priority, particularly with respect to the murders of Bishop Juan José Gerardi, and of former presidential and vice-presidential candidates, such as Manuel Colom Argueta, Alberto Fuentes Mohr and Jorge Carpio Nicolle.

"The absence of justice in these cases, as well for as a number of past massacres, including Río Negro, Tululché, Xamán and Dos Erres, has become emblematic," the human rights organization said.

"These cases -- and many others like them -- must be resolved by bringing the perpetrators to justice. This is the only way to ensure that the Guatemalan electorate and the international community can trust the authorities to improve the country's human rights situation."

The organization urged candidates to make clear what steps they intend to take to guarantee the safety of witnesses in trials for past human rights violations, and to protect and support human rights defenders and others active in non-governmental organizations and civil society.

All candidates should ensure that their party does not endorse the candidacy of anyone named as responsible for past human rights abuses. They should also publicly address the problems of corruption in the judicial system, the mushrooming of private security firms and the uncontrolled flow of small arms into and within Guatemala, all of which represent grave threats to citizens' security and human rights.

Amnesty International also asked all candidates to set out clear steps for ensuring that progress is made in implementing the Peace Accords and the recommendations of the Historical Clarification

Commission, particularly those calling for reparations for the victims of past abuses and for investigations into the role of the military in past abuses and the fate of all the “disappeared.”  
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