

UA 271/91

Apparent Extrajudicial Execution

8 August 1991

GUATEMALA:

José Miguel MÉRIDA ESCOBAR

Amnesty International is concerned at the apparent extrajudicial execution of 36-year-old José Miguel Mérida Escobar, head of the Homicide Section in the Departamento de Investigaciones Criminológicas (DIC), Department of Criminal Investigation, of the Guatemalan National Police. The killing is believed to be linked to his role in investigating previous extrajudicial executions and his reported allegations that military officials were involved in a recent case.

According to the information received by Amnesty International, on the morning of 5 August 1991, José Miguel Mérida Escobar had just left the headquarters of the Guatemalan National Police in zone 1 of Guatemala City.

He was walking with his wife and his son along 14th street, between 5th and 4th Avenues and was approximately 70 metres from the National Police building when a man approached him and shot him five times at point-blank range, killing him. After the shooting the killer escaped with another person on a motorbike. A passer-by was also wounded in the attack.

José Miguel Mérida Escobar was responsible for the investigation into the killing, on 11 September 1990, of anthropologist Myrna Mack Chang in circumstances suggesting the involvement of the security forces (*see Guatemala: Killing of Myrna Elizabeth Mack Chang, AI INDEX: AMR 34/55/90, September 1990*).

Myrna Mack's work involved studies on development, people displaced by the violence in Guatemala, and, at the time of her death, a study on the socio-ecological impact of agricultural diversification in Chimaltenango. José Miguel Mérida Escobar was the author of the police report in which it was stated that the reasons of her killing were political. In June 1991, José Miguel Mérida Escobar was reportedly summoned to give evidence in court about the anthropologist's murder, and, on that occasion, he accused high-ranking military officers of having participated directly or indirectly in the killing.

Two arrest warrants were issued on 28 June 1991, one of them against a member of the security forces. José Mérida had also reportedly stated he would collaborate fully with the court case if guarantees were given for him and his family to leave the country safely. At the time of his killing, he was reportedly preparing to leave Guatemala to go to the United States, where it was hoped he would be able to testify before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on the killing of Myrna Mack. Sources in Guatemala believe that the killing of José Miguel Mérida Escobar is directly related to his role in the investigations of the Myrna Mack case.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

President Jorge Serrano Elías came to power in January 1991. During his presidential campaign he had pledged to ensure protection of human rights. However, Amnesty International remains seriously concerned at what appears to be a deterioration in the human rights situation in the country in past months, including an increased number of killings, death threats, torture and "disappearances". As in past years, the choice of victim and the manner in which the abuses have been carried out suggest the involvement of members of the official security forces.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Telegrams/telexes/faxes/telephone calls/express and airmail letters:

Sections are particularly asked, where possible, to engage the cooperation of police contacts/police groups in letter-writing on this action.

- expressing concern at the apparent extrajudicial execution of José Miguel Mérida Escobar and at reports that his killing may have been a result of his investigations into the involvement of security forces in the killing of Myrna Mack;
- urging that a full and impartial investigation be initiated immediately into his killing and that the results be made public;
- urging that those found to be responsible be brought to justice.

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APPEALS TO:

S.E. Jorge Serrano Elías
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 Presidente de la República de Guatemala
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 Guatemala, Guatemala
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Gral. Luis Francisco Mendoza García
[Salutation: Señor Ministro]
 Ministro de Defensa
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COPIES TO one or more of the following:

Lic. Ramiro de León Carpio
 Procurador de Derechos Humanos
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Señor Acisclo Valladares
[Salutation: Señor Procurador General]
 Procurador General de la Nación
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Cnel. Julio Enrique Paiz Bolaños
[Salutation: Señor Director]
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Padre Andrés Girón León
 Presidente
 Comisión de Derechos Humanos

Congreso Nacional de la República
9 Av. 9-48, Zona 1
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(Association of Police Officers:)
Club de Oficiales de la Policía
Nacional
21 Av. 12-17 Z 6
Guatemala, Guatemala

(Association of Retired Police
Officers:)
Asociación de Jubilados de la Policía
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Zona 6
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and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 19 September 1991.