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Guatemala: Ballots or Bullets? Political violence must be addressed

As presidential elections approach in Guatemala, the political violence shaking the country seriously jeopardizes the validity of the upcoming November vote there, Amnesty International said today.

"The current deterioration in the human rights situation in Guatemala is so severe that there is a real danger that the country is returning to the ruthless violence and killings which characterised the country's long-term civil conflict," Amnesty International warned, noting that violence explicitly linked to the electoral campaign is on the increase.

In one recent incident, Rubén Zamora editor of a major Guatemalan newspaper, which has been outspoken in its denunciation of corruption amongst high level officials of the current administration, was attacked in his home. He described his twelve assailants as having military demeanour, and said that he believed they were acting on behalf of the ruling government party, the *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco* (FRG). The attack came the day after Zamora had published an opinion piece which charged the FRG's presidential candidate, General Efraín Ríos Montt, with being an integral part of the so-called "parallel power structure" which Zamora said had not only run the country for the last twenty years, but also headed up the country's extensive organised crime network.

"The democratic process has been seriously undermined by the general's refusal to revoke his candidacy. Not only is his candidacy prohibited under the Guatemalan constitution because of his earlier involvement in a coup," Amnesty International said, "but he is also facing suits for genocide and other crimes against humanity in both Guatemala and abroad."

"The General's intransigence in insisting on his candidacy in these circumstances is directly related to pitched conflicts in recent days between peasant communities and delegations of FRG candidates, including the General, who insisted on visiting rural communities on the very day that villagers were reburying relatives massacred under the General's scorched earth policies of the early 1980s."

Foreign journalists and human rights workers were also attacked in incidents which observers say were the results of deliberate FRG provocation.

The conflicts in the countryside and the attack on Zamora comes in the wake of other election-related violence throughout the country. In Chiquimula Department alone, six activists of one opposition political party were killed in the past four months, apparent victims of former military commissioners affiliated to the FRG. Indeed, the FRG's rural electoral strategy has explicitly sought to

ensure the support of both the military commissioners and the army's war-time civilian adjuncts, the civil patrols, by promising them payment for their service during the conflict years. This has exacerbated tensions between groups of peasants who served in the patrols and those who did not, and between those who support political parties other than the FRG and local FRG activists.

Human rights defenders also continue to be heavily targeted in the lead-up to the elections, and the state's own human rights officials have also been attacked; staff of the Human Rights Procurator's Office have been threatened in a number of departments and on 11 June, Josué Israel López, the Auxiliary Human Rights Procurator for Chimaltenango Department, a prominent indigenous lawyer, was killed. The Attorney General's Special Investigator named to investigate abuses against Human Rights Defenders and her assistant then both received warnings, telling them to discontinue their investigations of the murder or they would get a "surprise".

Another worrying new development has been the killing of five Mayan priests in recent months, possibly in retaliation for their role in the exhumation and reburial of some of the victims of the Guatemalan army's ruthless counter-insurgency campaign of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"The human rights situation in Guatemala is at crisis point," Amnesty International emphasised, "the international community must take urgent steps to halt the cycle of political violence."

"In particular the Consultative Group of major donor countries and institutions to the Guatemalan peace process must insist on implementation of the recommendations it made during its recent meeting in Guatemala. These recommendations included human rights areas where the Groups said it had to see progress if cooperation monies were to continue," Amnesty International said.

These included a demand that the human rights situation be improved, that citizen security concerns be addressed, and impunity confronted, including through ensuring that justice is done for past atrocities.

Yet only a few weeks after the Group set these criteria, there has been a steady catalogue of further outrages in the country. Indeed, abuses against human rights defenders continue to be such a frequent occurrence that a recent Amnesty International delegation was told that prominent activists and organisations have received so many death threats, that they consider them a routine part of daily life, and no longer bother even to denounce them.

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