

Guatemala: Threats against Human Rights Procurator's Office must stop

Officials mandated to investigate human rights violations in Guatemala must be allowed to carry out their work without becoming themselves the victims of abuses, Amnesty International said today, expressing concern at the recent wave of threats and intimidation against staff from the Human Rights Procurator's Office.

In the most recent instance, Javier Méndez Games, auxiliary human rights procurator of Coatepeque, Quetzaltenango department, reported a spate of death threats and intimidating phone calls -- including one where what sounded like a gun was fired. On 5 October, assailants broke into his Coatepeque offices and destroyed the office's service car.

It is thought that the threats and harassment suffered by the auxiliary procurator may be the result of the investigations and denunciations of corruption his office has made against regional state institutions, including the national police force.

"These threats are part of an extremely worrying pattern of abuses targetted particularly at those investigating human rights violations or working to combat impunity," Amnesty International said. Over the past year, the organization has frequently reported on attacks on human rights defenders and representatives of civil society in the context of the country's deteriorating human rights situation.

"The Guatemalan authorities have a duty to guarantee the security of all those involved in the protection of human rights and to carry out prompt, thorough and impartial investigations in all cases of harassment,

with a view to bringing those responsible to justice," Amnesty International said.

The organization also called on the Guatemalan government to institute special protection measures for all staff of the Human Rights Procurator's offices who have received threats or other forms of intimidation.

Background

Guatemala's Human Rights Procurator is elected by Congress every five years to investigate abuses and make recommendations to the government on human rights issues. The regional auxiliary procurator offices conduct the same work at a regional level.

In recent months, staff from a number of regional offices have been targets in what appears to be a systematic pattern of threats and intimidation. In October 2001, Urías Bautista Orozco, from the Sololá regional office of the auxiliary procurator, was verbally abused and the walls of the office were vandalised. He and his staff had previously received death threats, and his assistant was subjected to short-term arrest, apparently in retaliation for their finding the National Police responsible for the killing of an indigenous lands rights demonstrator in October 2000. More threats and intimidation against staff in regional procurators' offices have been reported in Izabal, Huehuetenango and Retalhuleu departments, as well as in the city of Quetzaltenango.

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