

7 December 2001

AI Index AMR 34/045/2001 - News Service Nr. 217

Guatemala: Shadow of Dos Erres massacre over new Minister of Interior

On the 19th anniversary of the massacre of at least 350 people including numerous women and children at Dos Erres, El Petén, Amnesty International expressed concern that Guatemala's newly appointed Minister of the Interior, former General Eduardo Arévalo Lacs, may have been involved in past human rights violations, including the Dos Erres massacre itself.

Guatemalan human rights groups believe that former General Arévalo Lacs may have trained the military patrol responsible for the massacre at Dos Erres, perpetrated by the Guatemalan army and its civilian adjuncts, the civil patrols and local military commissioners. According to Guatemalan human rights organizations, at least four other officials who participated in the massacre are still in active service.

"General Arévalo Lacs' appointment should be reconsidered while his alleged involvement in the Dos Erres massacre is investigated," Amnesty International said. "If he was found to have been involved, he should be brought to justice."

Only days ago, the Guatemalan government announced that it will pay Q14 million (approximately US\$ 1,755,500) to the relatives of 250 of those who died at Dos Erres in compliance with the terms of a "friendly agreement" negotiated under the auspices of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2000.

"Such reparations are an acknowledgement by the State that its agents were responsible for the loss of lives, property, livelihoods and sacred sites caused by the massacre, and as such are to be welcomed," Amnesty International said. "However, compensation is not enough and the Guatemalan government must

also ensure that justice is done in this and all other cases of gross human rights violations and that those responsible do not continue to enjoy impunity."

Amnesty International also hopes that the Guatemalan government will take similar steps with respect to survivors of the other 600 other known massacres carried out by the Guatemalan army during the conflict years.

Reports have also been received that Francisco Nájera Avendaño, named to serve under General Arévalo as Assistant Minister of the Interior, is also implicated in past human rights violations. Nájera, a former Army colonel, served as Sub-director of military intelligence in the early 1990s, when that agency was allegedly responsible for a series of death threats, bombings and raids of Guatemalan non-governmental organizations, "disappearances", illegal arrests and torture. Amnesty International believes that his appointment must also be reconsidered while these allegations are investigated. Should they be found to be accurate, he too must answer for his crimes before the Guatemalan courts.

The organization is furthermore concerned at indications that former General Arévalo Lacs, named at the end of November, has already launched a series of verbal attacks on the local human rights community, declaring over the radio for example that the "human rights movement was composed of groups bent on destabilization."

"Arévalo Lacs seems to be following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Byron Barrientos, whose provocative statements against the Guatemalan human rights community have been followed by an escalation in threats and attacks against human rights activists who are now virtually living under siege," Amnesty International said.

Background

Minister Barrientos -- who stepped down from office in relation to corruption charges lodged against him -- also attacked international human rights groups. In June 2001, following an attempted kidnap of an Amnesty International delegate to Guatemala, Minister Barrientos accused Amnesty International of having fabricated the incident.

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