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## Guatemala: Justice closer for Myrna Mack?

On the eve of the scheduled re-opening of proceedings against three military officers accused of ordering the killing of anthropologist Myrna Mack in Guatemala in 1990, Amnesty International today expressed its hope that the wheels of justice are now to be truly set in motion and that all those who ordered or participated in this brutal killing will at last answer for their crimes.

"It is scandalous that almost 12 years have passed since Myrna Mack was killed, and those accused of having ordered her murder have not yet been brought to justice," the organization said.

"Resolution of this case will give hope to the tens of thousands of other victims and survivors who want to see the rule of law return to Guatemala and the perpetrators of past atrocities held accountable for their actions."

Guatemala recently accepted institutional responsibility for Myrna Mack's death before the Inter-American system for the protection of human rights, and agreed to pay compensation. However, Amnesty International stressed that what Myrna Mack's family and the Guatemalan human rights community want in this and thousands of other unresolved cases of past abuses is justice.

"Failure to convict those responsible for Myrna Mack's death has come to be seen as emblematic of the reigning impunity for the atrocities of the conflict years," the organization said.

During Guatemala's long-running conflict, gross violations were committed: the UN-Sponsored Commission of Historical Clarification estimated that there had been 200,000 extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" out of an estimated population of between 6 and 7 million, and that genocide had been carried out against Guatemala's indigenous peoples in four specific areas of the country. The Commission held the Guatemalan army and their civilian adjuncts, the civil patrols, responsible for the vast majority of the abuses.

"Despite the scale of these atrocities, the world's attention has long turned elsewhere. It is unconscionable that these violations are allowed to remain unpunished, and it is vital that the international community continue to follow efforts to seek justice in Guatemala for past violations of human rights," Amnesty International said.

**Background**

Anthropologist Myrna Mack was a founding member of Guatemalan social science research institute AVANCSO. In 1989, she published a path-breaking study which concluded that government counter-insurgency policies had caused the internal displacement of Guatemala's indigenous peoples and their resultant suffering. The study came as peace talks began and was highly damaging to the government. On 11 September 1990, Myrna Mack was repeatedly stabbed as she left AVANCSO's offices in Guatemala City.

Myrna Mack's sister, Helen, set up a Foundation in her sister's name to carry forward the long battle to convict her killers. She considers that Myrna was targeted because the military believed that the displaced peasants she was trying to help formed the base of the armed opposition and that her work was interfering with the army's counter-insurgency campaign in the indigenous highlands.

Helen Mack's courageous battle to bring those responsible for her sister's death to justice has been beset by judicial irregularities, incompetence, "lost" documentation, legal delays and obstruction, and attacks against witnesses and professionals involved in the investigation, including the original police inspector responsible for the case, who was murdered in 1991.

Finally, in 1993, a member of the notorious *Estado Mayor Presidencial* (EMP), Presidential High Command, Sergeant Noel de Jesús Beteta Alvarez was convicted and jailed for 25 years as the actual material author of the actual killing. By then, there had been 13 different judges on the case.

Since then, the struggle to bring those who ordered the killing to justice has continued, as have the threats and abuses. Most recently, on 23 August, Roberto Romero, the lawyer acting for the Mack Foundation received anonymous telephone death threats. Shortly afterwards a group of unknown individuals opened fire on his home in Guatemala City.

Should the proceedings actually open as scheduled and the accused, General Edgar Godoy and Colonels Juan Valencia and Juan Guillermo Oliva, be convicted, they will join the handful of others found guilty of a very few of the estimated 200,000 human rights abuses suffered by Guatemalans during the more than 30 years of civil conflict, formally ended with Peace Accords in 1996.

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