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Fear for safety

22 May 2001

HONDURAS

**Pedro Marchetti, priest and human rights defender  
Members of *Movimiento Campesino del Aguán* (MCA), Peasant  
Farmer Movement of Aguán**

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A powerful local politician has apparently hired gunmen to kill a Jesuit priest, who has been helping peasant farmers defend their land against the claims of major landowners. Father Pedro Marchetti was told of the plan on 2 May by concerned peasants.

Father Marchetti, a US citizen, has lived and worked in the northern region of Aguán for many years. He has campaigned with the *Movimiento Campesino del Aguán* (MCA), Aguán Peasant Farmers' Movement, which has been struggling to normalize the ownership of the land, and to prevent landowners from appropriating it permanently or using it to grow crops damaging to the environment and water resources.

Pedro Marchetti and MCA members have previously suffered intimidation and death threats from landowners and business people because of their legitimate activism for land rights. In October 1998, threats to kill Pedro Marchetti were made, allegedly by the same people, after he publicly stated the community's commitment to work for those responsible for the murder of local environmental activist Carlos Escaleras, killed in 1997, to be brought to justice.

A state prosecutor (*fiscal*) has submitted charges in court, against Pedro Marchetti and the MCA, for alleged illegal land appropriation. The *Coordinadora Nacional Contra la Impunidad* (CONACIM), National Coordination against Impunity, a federation of 10 non-governmental organizations, has denounced the investigation as politically motivated and intended solely to discredit both Pedro Marchetti and the MCA.

Government ministers have previously acknowledged the real threat to Pedro Marchetti's life, but the authorities have failed to properly investigate the allegations in order to bring those responsible for such serious threats to justice.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The campaign against Pedro Marchetti and the MCA is part of a pattern of human rights abuses against grassroots activists, including indigenous people and environmental activists, involved in defending their land rights and protection of the environment. Hired gunmen who have threatened and killed local activists are often reported to have links to local landowners. Amnesty International takes no position on disputes over land, but does campaign against human rights violations committed during these disputes (see *Honduras: Justice fails indigenous people*, AMR 37/10/99, September 1999).

At least 25 indigenous leaders have reportedly been murdered in the last 10 years, and the authorities have taken no action to bring the killers to justice. People involved in the protection of the environment have also fallen victim to landowners' interests: Carlos Escaleras and Carlos Antonio Luna, were killed in 1997 and 1998.

Amnesty International is concerned that the impunity enjoyed by those responsible encourages them to continue to commit human rights abuses in the knowledge that no action will be taken.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish, English or your own language:**

- expressing concern for the safety of Pedro Marchetti and members of the *Movimiento Campesino del Aguán*, after reports that gunmen have been hired to kill Pedro Marchetti;

- asking the authorities to take action to protect Father Marchetti and MCA members, and to consult with them on what action is appropriate;
- asking them to order a prompt, impartial and thorough investigation of the alleged plot and to bring those responsible to justice;
- expressing concern at the apparently politically motivated criminal investigation of Pedro Marchetti by the Prosecutor General's Office (*Ministerio Público*);
- reminding the government of its obligation to support human rights defenders in their work for the protection and promotion of the respect for human rights, as set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, of 9 December 1998.

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and to diplomatic representatives of Honduras accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 3 July 2001.