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MEXICO: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESENTS REPORT ON SERIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

MEXICO CITY -- Decades of pervasive human rights violations in Mexico are continuing today, fuelled by the virtual impunity for the violators, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

Leading the organization's delegation to the country, Deputy Secretary General Derek Evans said that "only a firm political decision by the Mexican Government to eliminate impunity will make it possible to eradicate the practice of torture and other human rights violations".

The chain of systemic legal problems leading to human rights violations starts at the point of arrest and continues into the courtrooms. Following reforms in 1993, the Public Ministry has almost discretionary powers of arrest without a court order, and can hold people in detention for up to four days without bringing them before a judge.

During this time, people are often held incommunicado and frequently tortured, often to force them to sign confessions. Despite evidence of such torture, these confessions are frequently the only evidence used to convict people and their claims of torture are almost never investigated.

An extreme example of this practice is the case of Diego and Claudio Martinez Villanueva. They were in custody from January to March 1994 awaiting trial on charges of murder based on confessions. Both brothers are deaf-mute, mentally handicapped, and illiterate. They were forced to stamp their fingerprints on fabricated statements of guilt and were reportedly beaten and tortured with electric shocks to the tongue while in police custody. In March 1994, the courts ordered their release, but the decision was only made effective in March 1995, following a growing outcry from local human rights organizations.

The legal remedies implemented by the government against this situation "have shown ineffective", according to Amnesty International's report.

The delegation also pointed out that extrajudicial executions and irregularities surrounding the investigation of those violations continue to be common, despite the efforts of the governmental *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*, National Human Rights Commission.

This fact is illustrated by the execution of 17 peasants in Guerrero state, last June and the events that followed. Despite the fact that the National Human Rights Commission found evidence of official responsibility for the killings and documented intentional irregularities in the initial investigations, a significant number of those reportedly responsible for masterminding the killings had not been brought to justice by September 1995. A widespread pattern of gross human rights violations against member of the opposition up to today in Guerrero state.

Individuals and local non-governmental organizations who work to change this situation and to raise human rights awareness among the Mexican population have suffered increasing

harassment and threats for their activities. This is the case of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, whose cathedral was stoned on 19 February 1995 by supporters of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) demonstrating with the acquiescence of the local authorities. "Alarmingly, the perpetrators of such actions appear to benefit from total impunity," Amnesty International said.

In addition to addressing the serious human rights situation, its causes and its technical aspects, the Amnesty International delegation called on the Mexican government to rapidly implement a set of recommendations. These include respect for procedural guarantees, accountability for those responsible for human rights violations, and compliance with international human rights legislation.

Mr Evans concluded that "the present administration has the opportunity to reverse the past pattern of abuses" and that doing so "should be the biggest challenge for Mexico before the end of the century".

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