

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN MEXICO

ME' PHAA INDIGENOUS
PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION

HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



MEMBERS OF THE ME' PHAA INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION IN MEXICO HAVE SUCCEEDED IN BRINGING CASES OF DISCRIMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO PUBLIC ATTENTION. TO CONTINUE THEIR WORK THEY HAVE HAD TO OVERCOME THREATS AND HARASSMENT AND THE KILLING OF ONE OF THEIR LEADING MEMBERS.

The Me' phaa Indigenous People's Organization (Organización del Pueblo Indígena Me' phaa, OPIM) was founded in 2002 to defend and promote the rights of the Me' phaa (Tlapanecas) Indigenous People in Mexico. The southern state of Guerrero, which is home to some 116,000 Me' phaa Indigenous People, has one of the highest levels of marginalization and some of the lowest indicators of human development in the country.

OPIM now has more than 300 active members working to promote Me' phaa cultural traditions and practices and campaigning to end the discriminatory practices that have condemned so many Indigenous communities to poverty and marginalization. OPIM promotes small-scale economic and social development projects to improve the living conditions of Me' phaa communities. It also campaigns for justice and reparation for a series of human rights violations committed against Me' phaa communities.

Ten years after the adoption of the UN Declaration on **Human Rights Defenders**, they continue to face restrictions on their work, harassment, intimidation and abuse. Yet despite the risks and challenges, human rights defenders continue to make a real difference to the lives of individuals around the world.

Human rights defenders strive to close the gap between the promise of justice and equality in dignity and rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the reality of continuing human rights abuses today. Their work is vital for the realization of human rights for all.

Among the cases taken up by OPIM was that of 14 Indigenous men subjected to forced sterilization in 1998. The men, from the community of El Camalote, were tricked into undergoing sterilization surgery in exchange for social benefits that they never received. In December 2007, following OPIM's persistent efforts to bring the case to public attention, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission called on the authorities to pay the men reparations. While a number of the Commission's recommendations have been implemented, none of those responsible for the forced sterilizations have been held to account.

Another important case pursued by OPIM was that of the rape of two Indigenous women in 2002. In separate incidents, Inés Fernández Ortega and Valentina Rosendo Cantú, were stopped and questioned by Mexican soldiers, who then raped them. Investigations into the cases by the military justice system failed to bring those responsible to justice. Members of OPIM, along with other local human rights organizations, continue to campaign for justice for the two women. In October 2007, the case was brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) which is now investigating the Mexican government's failure to ensure effective access to justice for Inés Fernández Ortega and Valentina Rosendo Cantú.

OPIM members have been subjected to a concerted pattern of harassment and intimidation. They have been attacked and threatened on numerous occasions; many have been placed under surveillance; one of their leaders has been killed. The



threats have intensified since OPIM actively started to demand justice in these cases.

HARASSMENT OF OPIM MEMBERS

On 17 April 2008, five OPIM members were detained and charged with the murder of Alejandro Feliciano García on 1 January 2008 in the town of El Camalote, Guerrero. The five OPIM members were stopped and taken into custody while crossing a routine military checkpoint in the area. Arrest warrants for another 10 OPIM members were also issued in connection with the murder, but have not been acted on, raising the concern that the authorities have simply detained the first five OPIM members they could locate.

Amnesty International believes that the charges against the 15 may be politically motivated and may have been brought solely as a result of their legitimate activities on behalf of local Me' phaa Indigenous communities. Of the five OPIM members detained, one is accused of having shot at the victim, while the remaining four are accused of instigating the crime because they allegedly participated in an OPIM



The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998. The term “human rights defender” is used to describe people who act in many different ways and in different capacities to protect and promote human rights.

Some defenders work against particular abuses, such as torture or forced eviction. Others work for the rights of specific groups or sectors of the population facing discrimination and disadvantage, such as Indigenous People, ethnic or religious minorities, rural women, street children, or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

For all their diversity, human rights defenders whoever they are and whatever they do have several characteristics in common. They all uphold the fundamental principle of universality – that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or any other status. All are committed to respecting the rights and freedoms of others in their own actions.

meeting that took place the day after the murder. The prosecution case appears to be based exclusively on two virtually identical eyewitness statements and a third witness statement providing second-hand information confirming the statements of the first two eyewitnesses. Efforts by the defence to question the reliability of the prosecution witnesses were also ignored. On 7 July 2008, the defence filed a federal injunction (amparo) calling for a review of the judge’s decision to commit the five for trial. A decision on the federal injunction was pending at the time of writing.

On 9 February 2008, Lorenzo Fernández Ortega, a leading member of OPIM and brother of Inés Fernández Ortega, was abducted. His body was found in Ayutla de los Libres the following day. There were signs that he had been tortured, but no autopsy was carried out and the investigation into his death has so far made no progress. Shortly before his death, he had told his sister of his fears for his own and other OPIM members’ safety after unidentified men had stopped him and asked him about their work.

Above: Obtilia Eugenio Manuel, human rights defender and member of the Me’ phaa Indigenous People’s Organization, during a presentation on autonomy development.

Cover image: Members of Me’ phaa and Na’ savi Indigenous communities in the state of Guerrero demonstrate on the 10th anniversary of the massacre of El Charco, where 10 Indigenous people were killed by the Mexican army on 7 June 1998.



Article 1, UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

9 DECEMBER 2008 MARKS THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE LEGITIMATE WORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND TAKE ACTION TO SUPPORT AND PROTECT THEM.

On the day Lorenzo Fernández Ortega was abducted, Obtilia Eugenio Manuel, another leading member of OPIM, received a threatening telephone call: "I know you are Obtilia, you'd better calm down your people and you'd better do it because I've got people watching you". Obtilia Eugenio Manuel has actively campaigned for justice for Valentina Rosendo Cantú and Inés Fernández Ortega.

"You keep on trying to attack us with your stupid lies about the rape of Valentina and Ines. We've had enough of the stupidities you accuse us of. We were already going to get you but now you are really in trouble".

Extract from a threatening letter received by Obtilia Eugenio Manuel in December 2004

In 2005, the IACHR asked the government to provide protection for Obtilia Eugenio



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Manuel and her relatives. In June 2008, the Commission asked the government to extend its provision of protection measures to 41 members of OPIM and asked the government to provide information on those already provided to Obtilia Eugenio Manuel and her family, following reports that these were inadequate.

TAKE ACTION NOW

Please write to the Mexican authorities:

- Highlighting the important contribution made by members of OPIM in promoting and defending the rights of the Me'phaa Indigenous People in Guerrero, and calling on the authorities to respect and acknowledge their legitimate work;
- Calling for an immediate and thorough investigation into threats against OPIM members and for those responsible to be brought to justice promptly;
- Calling on them to ensure that all those charged with homicide are given fair trials in accordance with international human rights standards;
- Calling for an effective and impartial investigation into the murder of Alejandro Feliciano García and for those responsible to be brought to justice;

- Calling for a full, prompt and impartial investigation into the killing of OPIM member Lorenzo Fernández Ortega, for those responsible to be brought to justice and for reparation to be provided to the family of the victim and the community;
- Urging them to fully implement requests for protection measures by the IACHR and to provide effective protection to OPIM members and their relatives, in accordance with their wishes.
- Reminding them of their obligation – set out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders – to recognize the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders and defenders' right to carry out their activities without obstacles or fear of reprisals.

Please send appeals to:

Minister of the Interior
Lic. Juan Camilo Mourriño Terrazo Secretaría de Gobernación
Bucareli 99, 1er. piso, Col. Juárez, Del. Cuauhtémoc, México D.F., CP 06600, MEXICO
Fax: +52 55 5093 3414
Email: secretario@segob.gob.mx
Salutation: Señor Secretario/Dear Minister

Governor of Guerrero
Lic. Zeferino Torreblanca Galindo Gobernador del Estado de Guerrero
Palacio de Gobierno, Edificio Centro, piso 2, Ciudad de los Servicios CP 39075, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico
Email: gobernador@guerrero.gob.mx
Fax: +52 747 471 9956
Salutation: Señor Gobernador/Dear Governor

**HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**



Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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