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Mexico: The Acteal massacre – one year on and still no justice

One year after 45 unarmed indigenous peasants were massacred in Acteal, Chiapas state, the Mexican authorities are still dragging their feet in the investigation and allowing tension to rise in the region, Amnesty International said today.

"To help prevent further killings, it is vital that those responsible for the massacre, including all state officials implicated in the incident, be promptly brought to justice," the organization added.

Compelling evidence on the Acteal massacre on 22 December 1997 shows that the authorities facilitated the arming of paramilitaries who carried out the killings and failed to intervene as the savage attack continued for hours.

Not bringing to justice all state officials implicated in the Acteal killings would be unacceptable. It would merely replicate the inaction of the authorities in bringing to justice those high-level officials identified by the Supreme Court as being implicated in the massacre of 17 peasants in Aguas Blancas, Guerrero State, in June 1995.

Background

Reports from Chiapas indicate an alarming increase in activities by paramilitary groups targeting peasants, and both Mexican and foreign human rights monitors.

Although the *Procuraduría General de la República*, the Attorney General's Office, acknowledged nearly a year ago that a number of such groups are active in Chiapas, nothing concrete has been done to put an end to their activities.

Numerous incidents over the past 12 months suggest that they continue to operate in close collusion with the authorities.

For example, over the last month alone, five peasants have reportedly been murdered by members of paramilitary groups in Chiapas. In an incident directly involving the military, three indigenous peasants were wounded by soldiers while protesting at the detention by the army of members of their community in Chenalhó, near the site of the Acteal massacre.

Amnesty International is also concerned that the proposed new law to disarm paramilitary groups (*Ley de Desarme Integral*), which implicitly recognizes the existence of such groups, should not be used as an alternative to investigations and prosecutions of those involved in human rights violations.

The authorities' response to the Acteal massacre has been largely aimed not at those responsible for the killings but at international human rights observers. Dozens of foreign nationals on human rights missions have been expelled with no opportunity to have their cases judicially

reviewed prior to their deportation. Also, the draconian new visa regulations brought in last May have hampered their work.

As well as showing official contempt for human rights work, these measures send the wrong message to paramilitary groups and could have tragic consequences for the local peasant communities and for Mexican human rights defenders.

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