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Guatemala: Wave of raids against human rights organizations

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Guatemala's human rights movement is receiving a dangerous message: Your work is not welcome and will not be tolerated, said Amnesty International in response to a series of raids against Guatemala's social and human rights organizations.

Between 8 and 11 May, the offices of eight organizations were raided by unknown individuals. In most cases, important information was stolen while other objects of value were left behind, clearly indicating the political motivation behind the raids.

During the night of 11 May, intruders broke into the offices of the organization Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice and Against Forgetting and Silence - HIJOS) for the second time this year. After thoroughly searching the organization's files, the unknown intruders made off with two computers containing valuable information on the organization's work. Other objects of value, such as a laptop computer and an overhead projector, were left behind.

During the night of 8 May, the offices of the Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (National Coordinating Body of Peasant Farmer Organizations - CNOC) were raided. The intruders took 15 computers containing important information on the organization's work and members. Other objects of value such as printers, scanners, photocopiers, telephones and faxes were not taken.

"The HIJOS and CNOC cases are far from isolated. The attacks on social and human rights organizations are turning into a dangerous phenomenon, and one that is taking place in full view of the authorities and with total impunity," said Amnesty International.

All the organizations raided have been critical of the new economic policies adopted by the government and of its attitude towards the Peace Accords. Several of the organizations are members of the Movimiento Indígena, Campesino, Sindical y Popular (Indigenous, Peasant, Union and Popular Movement - MICSP), an association that has been at the forefront of opposition to the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and mining activities.

In the context of demonstrations against the Free Trade Agreement and mining in 2005, human rights defenders and social activists denounced the excessive use of force on the part of the security forces.

Demonstrations held around the country on 14 March in protest at the ratification of the Free Trade Treaty by the Guatemalan Congress the day before led to clashes between demonstrators and police, resulting in one death and dozens of wounded.

"The new wave of raids against the work of the social and human rights organizations has exposed an organized campaign on the part of clandestine groups to obtain intelligence on the work of human rights defenders and social activists, as they represent a threat to certain political interests."

"The government must publicly recognize the importance of civil society's work and facilitate spaces for dialogue on government policies."

Amnesty International is appealing once more to the Guatemalan authorities to investigate the raids and harassment of human rights defenders and bring those responsible to justice.

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