

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Guatemala : Pending trial of Bruce Harris, Director of children's rights organization

Amnesty International today expressed alarm that criminal proceedings in relation to allegations of defamation are being brought against human rights defender Bruce Harris, Director of the renowned and respected children's rights organization, Casa Alianza, who is due to stand trial tomorrow and, if convicted, will face up to 5 years in prison.

Amnesty International is concerned that the case of Bruce Harris demonstrates that the use of criminal defamation charges against those who expose human rights abuses and issues of social concern in Guatemala is yet another form of persecution of human rights defenders. Between 2000 and 2003 AI reported the killing of at least 18 Guatemalan human rights defenders.

In the past, criminal defamation laws have frequently been used by authoritarian governments in some countries of the Americas region to intimidate and silence critics and government opponents or to pressurise human rights activists into dropping or desisting from pursuing reports of human rights violations. Amnesty International regrets that such practices appear to be ongoing in Guatemala.