

amnesty international news release

Index: AMR 29/23/90

Distr: SC/PO

INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT
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INTERNATIONAL EMBARGO: 0001 hrs gmt Tuesday 26 June 1990
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EL SALVADOR: HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES PERSIST DESPITE GOVERNMENT PLEDGES

Torture, killings, and "disappearances" continue to be committed with impunity in El Salvador despite pledges by civilian and military authorities that steps are being taken to prevent and investigate these abuses, Amnesty International said today (Tuesday 26 June).

Military and police are still flouting the law, and no effective measures have been taken to control the activities of "death squads" widely believed to be linked to the armed forces.

Cooperative members, trade unionists, church and other community workers are among those who risk persecution.

Just two days before an Amnesty International delegation arrived in El Salvador on 22 April, a farming cooperative leader was shot by uniformed soldiers and prevented from receiving medical treatment, dying an hour later.

The delegation collected details of 17 "death squad" killings since the beginning of the year. In March alone, three bodies were dumped in the streets of San Salvador with bullet wounds - two more were found by the roadside in other parts of the country, severely burned with intestines protruding.

Interviews with former detainees arrested during the last three months confirmed reports that torture persists during initial military or police custody and is part of a deliberate policy to intimidate and extract information. A 50-year-old man said he had been blindfolded, stripped, his thumbs tied behind his back, repeatedly beaten and almost drowned after he was arrested by soldiers in April. Other former detainees described being suspended by the feet or by wrists tied behind the back while in military custody and one said he almost suffocated when a lime-filled hood (capucha) was placed over his head six times. The organization also fears that other political detainees may still be in prison solely on the basis of extrajudicial confessions obtained under torture or duress.

Relatives of the "disappeared" described their continuing anguish at the failure of the authorities to clarify the whereabouts of missing family members, in spite of evidence of their arrest. "Disappearances" - frequently reported under previous administrations - have continued under the ARENA government, which came to power last June. Among them are six agricultural cooperative members abducted in front of witnesses in December 1989 in Ahuachapan and several teenagers reported abducted since November.

During its visit to El Salvador, the delegation met civilian and military authorities. It welcomes their willingness to discuss human rights issues and notes proposals for reforms, including the establishment of a human rights commission within the armed forces and a 24-hour office in the judiciary to give information about arrests. It also welcomes recent assurances by President Cristiani that efforts are being made to eradicate "arrogance, arbitrariness and immoral behaviour" within the armed forces.

However, evidence of the continuing disregard for human rights underscores the need for urgent steps to eliminate abuses. The lack of effective investigations only serves to give the impression that killings and other abuses can be carried out with impunity. Delays in acknowledging arrests, incommunicado detention, and the failure of captors to identify themselves or indicate where detainees are being taken all facilitate torture and "disappearances".

"The authorities must prove their commitment to human rights by taking concrete measures to protect detainees and by bringing those responsible for violations to justice " Amnesty International said.

"Only a tiny handful of those responsible for abuses have ever been identified, and scores of killings, "disappearances" and torture cases remain uninvestigated."

Investigations must determine the chain of command of responsibility and identify anyone found to have planned, ordered or covered up abuses. Recent inquiries into the brutal murder of six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter last November suggest that military personnel burned vital evidence as part of their attempts to cover up the killings.

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports that members of the armed opposition Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, (FMLN), were responsible for a number of executions over the past year.

It calls on the government and the FMLN to place human rights at the centre of peace talks currently underway and to draw up practical and concrete proposals for the long-term protection of human rights in El Salvador.

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT TUESDAY 26 JUNE 1990