

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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EXTRA 01/94 Death threats/ fear for safety

6 January 1994

EL SALVADOR María Mirtala López (opposition youth activist)

María Mirtala López, leader of the youth organization of the opposition political party **Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)**, has been threatened by unknown individuals believed to be members of government-linked "death squads".

María Mirtala López' home was broken into on the evening of 29 December 1993. The assailants ransacked her room and stole documents relating to the FMLN's campaign for the forthcoming elections in March 1994. A picture of María Mirtala López was destroyed and a note left behind with the initials "E.M". These initials, which could stand for *Escuadrón de la Muerte* (Death Squad), have appeared in countless similar attacks and threats in the past.

Preliminary investigations by ONUSAL, the UN human rights monitoring mission in El Salvador, have discounted robbery as a possible motive. The FMLN's youth organization has denounced the incident as part of an intimidation campaign by the far-right aimed at activists and supporters of the FMLN in the run-up to the elections.

María Mirtala López has received numerous death threats in the past, some issued in the name of clandestine groups such as the *Frente Anticomunista Salvadoreño* and the *Brigada Maximiliano Hernández Martínez*. Despite assurances by the government that these threats were being investigated, no steps were ever taken to identify those responsible.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the last three months, since the electoral campaign began, many FMLN activists have been targets of apparently political killings and death threats. The government established an inter-institutional commission to investigate two of the recent killings, one of which it found not to have been politically motivated. Nevertheless the vast majority of these killings and threats remain unclarified, with little or no investigation being carried out.

In March 1993 the Truth Commission, appointed as a result of the 1992 peace accords, concluded that "death squads" linked to state structures were an instrument of terror used to eliminate political opponents and called for urgent investigations into these groups as they still posed a threat to society. Official documents recently released in the United States have implicated senior Salvadorean government officials in "death squad" activities and revealed complicity by previous US administrations. After much domestic and international pressure to put an end to the operations of "death squads", the government set up a commission in early December to investigate illegal armed groups; its findings are to be published in May 1994. However, Amnesty

International is concerned that certain restrictions on the commission's mandate may prevent it from carrying out an exhaustive and impartial investigation into "death squad" abuses.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- expressing concern at the "death squad"-style threats against María Mirtala López and asking for measures to guarantee her safety;
- asking that immediate steps be taken to identify those responsible and bring them to justice;
- asking for assurances that the newly-created investigative commissions will not only clarify recent killings and threats, but will look into all the evidence which has come to light regarding the operation of "death squads" and their links to state structures;
- stating that the eradication of "death squads" and the bringing to justice of their members is an essential guarantee for the forthcoming elections and for human rights in the future.

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and to diplomatic representatives of El Salvador accredited to your country

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat or your section office if sending appeals after 6 February 1994.