

PUBLIC

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Fear for Safety

18 February 2003

GUATEMALA Staff of the Human Rights Procurator's (PDH) Auxiliary Office, in the town of Nebaj, Department of El Quiché;
Members of the Centre for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH);
Members of the Movement of Displaced Peoples of the North of Quiché.

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of staff in the Nebaj office of the Procurador de Derechos Humanos, (PDH), Human Rights Procurator, and for members of the above named human rights organizations living and working in the Ixil area of Guatemala, in the northwestern highland Department of El Quiché. Inflammatory statements by public officials have led to an environment in which human rights activists increasingly fear for their lives.

On 26 January 2003, the Governor of El Quiché gave a speech in the community of Ilom in the Ixil region. He allegedly blamed human rights activists for preventing his office from paying a compensation package to former members of the Patrullas de Auto-Defensa Civil, (PAC) Civil Defence Patrols, civilian adjuncts of the military who were responsible for mass human rights violations during Guatemala's long-running internal conflict. The Governor reportedly affirmed that the money was available to be paid and stated that if ex-PAC members did not receive the payments by 20 March this year, it was the express responsibility of the three organizations named above. The organizations' members fear violence against them by former PAC members if they do not receive compensation, which could lead to the killings of the human rights defenders involved.

The relationship between ex-PAC members and human rights activists in the area has become increasingly tense since the civil patrols re-emerged in 2002 demanding compensation for the service they rendered while serving in the patrols during Guatemala's conflict (1960-1996). Ex-civil patrollers in the area blame human rights organisations for obstructing the payment of compensation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Civil patrols were initiated in 1981 under the Presidency of General Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982). Operating under military orders they were charged by the army to act as their civilian adjuncts and 'protect' their communities from the armed opposition. Participation was obligatory and some of those who carried out abuses were coerced into doing so under threat of death to themselves and their families. The 1996 Peace Accords, brokered under the auspices of the United Nations, provided for the disbanding of the patrols. However, they have continued to operate in various areas of the country and have allegedly been responsible for new human rights abuses. During 2002, former patrol members have been particularly forceful in their demands for compensation for their service in the patrols during the internal armed conflict. Demonstrations of up to 20,000 former patrollers have taken place throughout the country. Their activities have been most visible and insistent in areas where the patrols were most aggressively mobilized by the army to support its scorched earth counter-insurgency campaign in which over 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or "disappeared" (see AMR 34/053/2002).

In this context, in various departments of Guatemala, including Huehuetenango, Sololá, Baja Verapaz, Alta Verapaz and San Marcos, former civil patrollers have recently threatened to first occupy and then burn down auxiliary PDH offices if their demands for compensation are not fully met (see UA 293/02, AMR 34/061/2002, 27 September 2002).

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish and English or your own language:

- urging the authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure that public officials do not use inflammatory discourse to discredit human rights organizations and government offices mandated to protect human rights, as such language may create an environment that endangers the work and lives of human rights defenders;
- urging the authorities to take all the necessary measures to ensure the safety of the staff members of the Human Rights Procurator's (PDH) Auxiliary Office, in the town of Nebaj, Department of El Quiché; the members of the Centre for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH); and members of the Movement of Displaced Peoples of the North of Quiché;
- reminding the authorities that the civil patrols were to have been abolished under the peace accords, and that countries and international organizations that have supported the peace process in Guatemala are monitoring the government's reaction to the re-surfacing of the patrols and new abuses by them.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic of Guatemala

Lic. Alfonso Portillo Cabrera

Presidente de la República de Guatemala 6a. Avenida "A" 4-41, Zona 1, Guatemala, Guatemala

Telegram: Presidente de la República de Guatemala, Guatemala City, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 253 0801

Salutation: Excelentísimo Sr. Presidente

Secretary of Strategic Analysis

Arturo Montenegro

Secretario de Análisis Estratégicos, Secretaría de Análisis Estratégicos

6a Avenida 'A' 3-53, Zona 1, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Telegram: Secretario de Análisis Estratégicos, Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Fax: +502 232 2886

Salutation: Señor Secretario/Dear Secretary

Minister of the Interior

Lic. Adolfo Reyes Calderón

Ministro de Gobernación

6ª Avenida 4-64, Zona 4

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Telegram: Minister of the Interior, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: +502 362 0239 / 362 0237

Salutation: Dear Minister/Señor Ministro

Governor of El Quiché.

Lic. Elmer Rolando Pacheco Noriega

Primera Avenida, 3-Calle

Edificio de Gobernación Departamental

Santa Cruz del Quiché

El Quiché, Guatemala.

Fax: + 502 755 1433

Salutation: Señor Gobernador/Dear Governor

COPIES TO:

Human Rights Procurator

Lic. Sergio Morales

Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos

12 Avenida 12-72, Zona 1

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: +502 238 1734

Human Rights Organisation

Centre for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH)

9.a Ave. 2-59 Zona 1

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: + 502 251 8163

Newspaper

Diario Prensa Libre

13 Calle 9-31, Zona I

Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala

Fax: +502 251 8768/ 230 2193/ 230 2257

and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 31st March 2003.