

PUBLIC

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UA 115/02 Fear for safety

16 April 2002

GUATEMALA David Herrera (m), journalist

Journalist David Herrera was abducted by gunmen on 10 April, but managed to escape. The abduction appears to have been linked to his work assisting foreign journalists and film crews visiting the country, many of them to investigate human rights issues. Amnesty International believes his life is in danger.

He had been on his way to pick up a journalist from US National Public Radio (NPR) when he was attacked. The journalist had spent a week collecting information on a range of human rights issues, with Herrera's assistance. As he left his office in downtown Guatemala City Herrera was seized by four armed men with what he described as "military-style" haircuts. They forced him into his rented car, and three of them drove off with him. They threatened to kill him, and demanded "the material" (*la materia*), which he took to mean tapes from sensitive interviews carried out the day before.

He managed to jump from the moving car and get away, but lost all of the papers he had been carrying, including his passport. As a result of his ordeal, he had to be hospitalised for psychological treatment, and then went into hiding. When he emerged from hiding to replace his passport and obtain a visa so he could leave the country, he was followed by two armed men. He has gone back into hiding.

The following day the Guatemalan authorities dismissed the abduction as a simple carjacking, before any investigation had taken place and without interviewing either Herrera or the NPR journalist.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Journalists, particularly those reporting on human rights issues or government corruption, routinely face threats and harassment (see for example UA 55/02, AMR 34/010/2002, 19 February 2002).

The issues David Herrera had helped the NPR journalist to investigate included the government's failure to implement the 1996 Peace Accords that formally ended the country's long-term civil conflict; the recent killing of a member of a new political party, in an apparent extrajudicial execution; the recent raid by the Guatemalan Anti-Narcotics Squad on the small hamlet of Chocón in Livingston, in which at least two villagers were killed and one "disappeared" (see UA 65/02, AMR 34/012/2002, 28 February 2002); and a new exhumation of a mass grave of people killed by the armed forces during the civil conflict, in the Rabinal area, Baja Verapaz Department. Exhumations had been suspended after a number of forensic anthropologists, some of them currently involved in exhumations, others who had assisted in earlier exhumations, received a series of death threats (see UA 68/02, AMR 34/014/2002, 5 March 2002, and follow-up).

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

- expressing concern that journalist David Herrera was reportedly abducted by armed men on 10 April, in Guatemala City, in an apparent attempt to intimidate him and other journalists, both Guatemalan and foreign, and prevent them from reporting on important human rights issues;

- stressing the importance of freedom of information in Guatemala's efforts to build a firm and lasting peace;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to investigate the abduction and bring those responsible to justice;
- urging them to take immediate steps to protect journalists and others engaged in lawful work on human rights inquiries, and to publicly express official support for the highly important work done by journalists and other investigators.

APPEALS TO:President of the Republic of Guatemala

Lic. Alfonso Portillo Cabrera

Presidente de la República de Guatemala

6a. Avenida "A" 4-46, Zona 1, Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Telegrams: Presidente de la República de Guatemala, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala**Fax: + 502 239 0090****Email: mensajes@presidenteportillo.gob.gt****Salutation: Dear President/Señor Presidente**Presidential spokesperson

Jorge Pérez

e-mail: jperez@concyt.gob.gt**Salutation: Dear Sir/Estimado Sr.**Minister of the Interior

Sr. Eduardo Arévalo Lacs

Ministro de Gobernación

Ministerio de Gobernación, 6ª Avenida 4-64, Zona 4

Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Telegrams: Ministro de Gobernación, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala**Fax: + 502 362 0239/362 0237****Email: monica24@intelnet.net.gt****Salutation: Dear Minister/Señor Ministro**Minister of Communications, Transport and Infrastructure

Sra. Flora de Ramos

Ministerio de Comunicaciones

Transportes y Obras Públicas

8ª Avenida y 15 Calle, Zona 3

Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

Telegrams: Ministra de Comunicaciones, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala**Fax: + 502 362 6066 / 6068****Salutation: Dear Secretary/Señora Secretaria****COPIES TO:**The Commission for Freedom of Press of the Association of Journalists of Guatemala

Sr. Mario Rene Chavez, Presidente, Comisión de Libertad de Prensa, APG y Amelia Folgar, Secretaria, Comisión de Libertad de Prensa, APG

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Fax: + 502 238 2781**Email: apege@intelnet.net.gt****Salutation: Dear Sirs/Estimados señores**

Presidential Human Rights Commission

COPREDEH

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Salutation:Dear Sirs/Estimados señores

Newspaper

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Salutation:Estimados señores

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 28 May 2002.