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Amnesty International police and military groups call for release of Colonel Otto Noack – possibly Guatemala's first known contemporary prisoner of conscience

Members and supporters of Amnesty International around the world, including its police and military groups, are calling on the Guatemalan military authorities to release Colonel Otto Noack, whom the organization has described as possibly Guatemala's first known contemporary prisoner of conscience.

Colonel Noack is currently serving 30 days in military custody on charges of "indiscipline." His crime? In a recent interview with Radio Netherlands, Colonel Noack expressed the opinion that the Guatemalan Armed Forces should acknowledge and apologise to the Guatemalan people for the excesses committed by the military during the country's recently ended long-term civil conflict.

Amnesty International supports the position taken by Colonel Noack. It believes that acknowledgement and verification of the facts of the atrocities committed during Guatemala's "dirty war" can make an important contribution towards overcoming Guatemala's legacy of past state abuses and building a true firm and lasting peace, as called for in the December 1996 Peace Accords.

Calling for Colonel Noack's release, retired Rear Admiral Jan Dam Backer, founder of Amnesty International's Netherlands military support group, has stated, for example, that: "international law specifically rejects the principle of due obedience when extrajudicial executions, torture or disappearance are ordered or committed".

Backer, who visited Guatemala on behalf of Amnesty International in 1985, continued that: "To use military language, the principle of 'intelligent bayonets' must prevail over that of 'blind bayonets': discipline and obedience have their limits and must stop at the commission of illegal acts".

"In calling for the gross abuses of this nature that were carried out by official forces during Guatemala's 'dirty war' to be officially and publicly recognised, Colonel Noack is simply asking for the most basic and minimal first step towards acknowledging and healing the pain and trauma experienced by victims and their relatives," he said.

Amnesty International also expressed its support for the position taken by Professor Christian Tomuschat, the German academic appointed by the United Nations (UN) to head Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission, established under the Peace Accords to clarify human rights violations and acts of violence suffered by the Guatemalan people in the context of the armed conflict.

Professor Tomuschat, a former UN Special Expert on Guatemala visited Colonel Noack in detention and expressed admiration for his courage in admitting that there had been military excesses during the “dirty war,” and in calling for this to be publicly acknowledged. Amnesty International rejected charges by Guatemalan authorities, including President Alvaro Arzú and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduardo Stein, that in doing so, Professor Tomuschat had exceeded his mandate and involved himself in the internal affairs of Guatemala.

Amnesty International believes that it is the responsibility of the Commission over which Professor Tomuschat presides -- and indeed of the entire international community -- to do everything possible to assist the Guatemalan State in ensuring transition to a society in which human rights are upheld. This would involve acknowledging and ending impunity for past abuses and compensating the victims and their families.

“Experience throughout the world, including elsewhere in Latin America and post-war Europe, has shown that when questions of responsibility and accountability for past human rights violations are not adequately addressed, they will not vanish. They will resurface at later stages, presenting the risk of renewed violations and further pain and suffering,” Amnesty International concluded.
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For further information, or to arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International Press Office on +44 171 413 5566/5808/5810.