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MEXICO: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL GRAVELY ALARMED AT SHARP INCREASE IN HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

Human rights violations in Mexico could spiral out of control unless the government takes immediate action to stop death threats, illegal arrests, torture, "disappearances" and unlawful executions, Amnesty International said today.

While civil and human rights activists are being particularly targeted, the recent rapid deterioration in the human rights situation in Mexico has led to violations against people from all walks of life, including journalists and lawyers, members of ethnic minorities, children, and even members of the public apparently selected at random.

"Despite scores of appeals to the authorities, members of the security forces and paramilitary groups continue to carry out abuses with official tolerance, fueling a growing feeling of terror among the Mexican population," Amnesty International said.

"It is only by bringing these perpetrators to justice that a clear message will be sent that these violations will not be tolerated."

Amnesty International is deeply concerned for the safety of human rights defenders, including members of the *Centro de Derechos Humanos Agustín Pro-Juárez (PRODH)*, Human Rights Centre Agustín Pro-Juárez, who are being targeted because of their human rights work.

For example, on 7 October, Pilar Noriega and Gracia Moheno, two human rights lawyers and members of PRODH, received death threats. Particular concern for their safety was raised by the fact that the threats were received in the PRODH office in Mexico City while the two lawyers were on a plane to Washington, USA, where they were to attend a meeting with the Interamerican Human Rights Commission for a presentation of the case of three extrajudicial executions by the Mexican army in Chiapas in 1994. The two women eventually arrived safely in Washington.

On 9 October, another member of PRODH received anonymous death threats against him and his family.

These threats are the latest in a series against members of PRODH, and form part of a sharp increase in the targeting of human rights defenders throughout Mexico. In scores of cases such threats contain extensive details about the victims' personal and professional lives, suggesting intelligence work, including telephone tapping. Amnesty International believes that such activities cannot happen without the authorities' acquiescence.

Amnesty International is also receiving an alarming number of complaints about human rights violations by the security forces against members of peasant and indigenous communities in various states of the republic. The security forces have stepped up operations to clamp down against the *Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR)*, Popular Revolutionary Army, an armed opposition group active in several states.

On 25 September at least eight people from the communities of Llano Maguey and San Agustín, in Loxica, Oaxaca State, were arbitrarily arrested by the security forces. On 29 September a further six members of the nearby community of San Francisco were arbitrarily arrested by a large group of members of the security forces operating in the region. They remain in prison in Oaxaca where they have reportedly suffered torture to extract false confessions of having links with guerrilla groups.

On 26 September Gregorio Alfonso Alvarado López, a teacher and Indian rights activist in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, “disappeared” after weeks of threats and intimidation by unidentified individuals. Although state authorities have acknowledged that he might have been abducted by paramilitary groups operating in the region, Gregorio Alfonso Alvarado López remains “disappeared” at the time of writing, raising grave fears about his safety.

Amnesty International has also condemned abuses reportedly perpetrated by members of the EPR. These include the apparent extrajudicial execution of one prisoner, Alberto Zamudio Estrada, a municipal police officer in Papalotla, State of Mexico, who was killed on 29 August by shots fired at close range after his detention by members of the EPR.

Scores of journalists have also been targeted recently by the Mexican security forces. For example Razhy Gonzalez, director of the weekly magazine *Contrapunto*, was abducted on 17 September in the town of Oaxaca by four heavily armed men believed to be police officers. He remained “disappeared” for two days, during which he was tortured in a secret detention centre and interrogated about his work. He and his family were threatened with death before his release without charge on 19 September.

A graphic illustration of how everybody is at risk is the case of Félix Salgado Macedonio, a Federal Senator for the State of Guerrero. On 15 September his car broke down on a road between Ometepec and Iguala, in Guerrero. While waiting for help he was approached by five members of the Federal Judicial Police driving an unidentified vehicle. He was surrounded, threatened with firearms and beaten. Despite the Senator's complaints, those responsible have not been brought to justice. He believes that, had he not been a Congressman, he would have possibly ended up in prison like so many other innocent victims of recent human rights violations.

Amnesty International is calling on the Mexican Government to adopt urgent and effective measures, including implementing fully its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations (UN) Convention Against Torture, to halt the spiralling pattern of human rights violations in Mexico, and the impunity benefitting the perpetrators.

The organization continues to call on the Mexican authorities to implement the recommendations included in Amnesty International's report *Human rights violations in Mexico: A challenge for the nineties*, published in November 1995, during a high-level visit to the country.

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