

UA 146/02

Fear for

**VENEZUELA Miguel Angel Zambrano Heredia (m), police officer
His wife and two children
Other witnesses to police death squad killings**

Police officers have reportedly attempted to kill a senior officer who is giving evidence to an inquiry into the activities of police death squads in Portuguesa state. Miguel Angel Zambrano Heredia began receiving death threats in December 2001. Amnesty International believe that he and his family are in grave danger, as are other witnesses involved in the investigation.

In December 2001 and January 2002 Inspector Miguel Angel Zambrano reportedly received repeated telephone calls threatening to kill him and his family unless he stopped helping the inquiry into police involvement into a death squad known as the "*Grupo Exterminio*". On 9 February a group of police officers reportedly attacked and beat him in the town of Acarigua in Portuguesa state. On 7 March two men believed to be Portuguesa state police officers came into his wife's office and reportedly threatened to rape and kill her if her husband would not leave the investigation into "*Grupo Exterminio*". Miguel Angel Zambrano was attacked in the street on 20 March, in city of Barquisimeto, in the neighbouring state of Lara. His attackers also fired at him from a car.

Official investigations into repeated reports of death squad killings in Portuguesa began in 2000. Twelve police officers have since been arrested, but none have so far been brought to trial and the killings are continuing. The investigation has been repeatedly hampered by threats against judges and investigating attorneys (*fiscales*).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Venezuelan Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (*Defensoria del Pueblo*) documented 392 reports of extrajudicial executions in Venezuela in 2001, many of which appeared to involve state and municipal police officers.

The human rights organization *Provea (Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos)* documented at least 68 such cases in the state of Portuguesa alone from October 2000 to September 2001.

Death squads have operated in Venezuela for many years, but their activities appear to have increased with the rise of violent crime in much of the country. They are often made up of serving police officers and other state employees, which means they can often act with impunity. They target suspected criminals, but are frequently involved in extortion and other criminal activities themselves.

The Venezuelan authorities' failure to provide effective witness protection has consistently undermined attempts to investigate and prosecute state officials accused of human rights violations, and deters potential witnesses from providing crucial evidence in such cases.

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

- expressing concern at the reported threats against police officer Miguel Angel Zambrano and his family;

- asking the authorities to take steps to guarantee their safety and that of others assisting the investigation into death squad killings in the state of Portuguesa;
- calling for a full, prompt and impartial investigation into the threats and attacks on Miguel Angel Zambrano, for the findings to be made public and for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- asking what progress has been made in investigations into death squad killings in Portuguesa and elsewhere in Venezuela;
- urging the authorities to set up an effective system to protect witnesses who may be able to provide evidence against state officials accused of involvement in human rights violations.

APPEALS TO:

Attorney General

Fiscal general de la República, Dr. Isaías Rodríguez
Avenida Universidad, Esquina Pele el ojo a Misericordia,
frente a Parque Carabobo, Caracas, VENEZUELA

Fax: + 58 212 576 44 19

Salutation: Estimado Señor Fiscal General/Dear Attorney General

Governor of Portuguesa State

Gobernadora Antonia Muñoz
Residencia Oficial de Gobernadores,
frente a la Plaza Miranda
Guanare,
Estado de Portuguesa, VENEZUELA

Fax: + 58 257 253 0693 (if a voice answers, say "tono de fax por favor")

Salutation: Estimada Gobernadora/ Dear Governor

Commander of Portuguesa State Police
Coronel Tony la Cruz,
Comandante General de la Policia de estado Portuguesa,
Barrio La Arenosa,
Carrera 15, frente de la estación de Servicio Guana.
Guanare, Estado de Portuguesa, VENEZUELA

Fax:+ 58 257 253 0955

Salutation: Estimado Señor Coronel/ Dear Coronel

Human Rights Ombudsman

Dr. Germán Mundarain
Defensoría del Pueblo
Bellas Artes comienzo Avenida México frente al Ateneo de Caracas
Plaza Morelos
Caracas, VENEZUELA

Fax: + 58 212 575 4467 (if a voice answers, say "tono de fax por favor")

Email: gmundarain@defensoria.gov.ve

Salutation: Estimado Señor/Dear Sir

COPIES TO:

Human Rights Group

Red de Apoyo por la Justicia y Paz
Parque Central, Edif. Caroata, Nivel Ofic.2,
Ofic. 220, Parque Central
Caracas, VENEZUELA

and to diplomatic representatives of Venezuela accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.