

AI INDEX: EUR 41/03/96
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 1 FEBRUARY 1996

SPAIN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON ETA TO RELEASE JOSE ANTONIO ORTEGA LARA

José Antonio Ortega Lara, a 37-year-old prison officer who was abducted in the northern Spanish city of Burgos on the evening of 17 January, should be released immediately, Amnesty International said today.

Concerns for Ortega Lara's safety were raised when he failed to return home from his place of work, Logroño prison. His abandoned car was recovered the following morning in a local industrial estate.

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), the armed Basque group, claimed responsibility for Ortega Lara's kidnapping in a statement published in the Basque newspaper *Egin* on 1 February. ETA's statement called for the Spanish authorities to abandon their strategy of repression of Basque prisoners, saying that in return it would be prepared to make "an equivalent gesture". It further stated that prison officers would cease to be the object of their actions.

The strategy referred to in ETA's statement is the policy of dispersal of Basque prisoners in penal institutions throughout Spain. ETA prisoners undertook a lengthy hunger-strike before Christmas against dispersal, calling for the state to cease treating them as hostages and for all their rights to be respected -- human as well as political -- putting an end to the punishment which dispersal caused to the family and friends of prisoners.

The issue of dispersal of prisoners is not within Amnesty International's mandate and consequently the organization takes no position on it. However, Amnesty International urges Ortega Lara's immediate and unconditional release.

"We unreservedly condemn abuses by armed political groups such as kidnapping, deliberate and arbitrary killings and hostage-taking which contravene international humanitarian standards," Amnesty International said.

Ortega Lara is the second person currently to be held as a hostage by ETA. José María Aldaya Etxebarua, a Basque businessman, has been held since 8 May 1995. In a statement issued on 25 May ETA claimed that the reason for its action in kidnapping him was his "refusal to pay the economic assistance requested to carry forward their fight for the liberty of the Basque people (*Euskal Herria*)...we wish to send a new warning as well to those businessmen who are in this position".

In a statement issued on 26 May 1995 Amnesty International urged Aldaya Etxebarua's immediate and unconditional release, condemning the practice of hostage-taking.

ENDS\