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Guatemala/Honduras: Economic, social and cultural rights activists at high risk of abuses

(Tegucigalpa) Human rights defenders working to protect the economic, social and cultural rights of the most marginalized people in Guatemala and Honduras are at high risk of threats, harassment, unfounded charges, attacks and even killings, a new report revealed today.

Amnesty International's report *Persecution and Resistance: The experience of human rights defenders in Guatemala and Honduras* exposes a systematic pattern of attacks against those who defend the rights of marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people.

"Those who protect others from suffering human rights violations end up suffering abuses themselves. The insecurity of human rights activists in Honduras and in Guatemala is reaching worrying proportions," said Susan Lee, Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

"Threats, intimidation, unfounded criminal charges and killings of activists in Honduras and Guatemala are designed to stop them from protecting people's rights, particularly when their work goes against powerful economic interests," said Susan Lee.

On 10 January 2007, Carlos Albacete Rosales and Piedad Espinosa Albacete, environmental activists working for the Guatemalan organization Trópico Verde, were attacked as they were returning home in a taxi from La Aurora National Airport.

As their taxi approached their home, a car overtook them and partially blocked the road. At least three men, wearing bullet proof vests and dressed in police clothes but without identification, got out and fired shots at the taxi. The men continued to fire at the taxi as it sped away, saving Carlos and Piedad's lives.

Noone has been brought to justice for the attack against the activists, particularly due to the irregularities in the investigation, including the reported tampering with ballistic evidence. Both Carlos and Piedad have since left Guatemala due to security concerns.

Over the past four years, Trópico Verde has campaigned to prevent the destruction of the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, the largest tropical rainforest in Central America. Local organizations have exposed attempts by cattle ranchers and alleged drug traffickers to take over land inside the Reserve.

Donny Reyes, treasurer of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organization Rainbow Association (Asociación Arcoiris) in Honduras, was arbitrarily detained on 18 March 2007. He told Amnesty International he was stopped by six police officers and asked for his identity documents as he left the Rainbow Association offices in Tegucigalpa with a colleague. Although he did so, the police beat him and forced him into the car. He was then taken to the Comayagüela police station. Donny then heard the officer who put him in the cell telling the other inmates "look, I'm bringing you a little princess, you know what to do."

Donny Reyes told Amnesty International that the other detainees took this as a signal to beat him and rape him repeatedly. He was released after six and a half hours when he agreed to pay a sum of money. Three days later, he reported what had happened to the Public Prosecutor's Office and to a senior police officer. He also underwent

forensic examinations to record the injuries he had suffered.

Donny's ordeal is part of a pattern of attacks against the Rainbow Association – including raids on their offices and intimidation.

To date, the investigations into the arbitrary detention and torture against Donny Reyes have not advanced.

On 4 December 2006, Dionisio Díaz García, a lawyer with the human rights organization Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), was shot dead as he was driving to the Honduran Supreme Court to prepare for a hearing on a case of unfair dismissal against a private security company.

ASJ members have been subjected to a long campaign of threats and surveillance, which has intensified since the killing of Dionisio.

Those responsible for killing Dionisio Díaz have still not been brought to justice and the authorities have failed to conduct adequate investigations into the threats and intimidation against ASJ members or to provide them with adequate protection.

“It is high time for the authorities to investigate these abuses and bring those responsible to justice. Justice is the best and only real protection mechanism for human rights activists,” said Susan Lee.

Amnesty International calls on the governments of Honduras and Guatemala to develop a National Plan of Action to ensure that human rights activists are able to carry out their work without fear of reprisals.

This plan must include political, practical and legal measures to: investigate all cases of human rights abuses against activists and ensure their immediate protection.

A copy of Persecution and Resistance: The experience of human rights defenders in Guatemala and Honduras, will be available from 8 August on: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR020012007>

For more information on the situation facing human rights activists in Honduras and Guatemala, including webclips with interviews, please see: www.amnesty.org

Public Document

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