

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Threats/Harassment/Arbitrary Detention

29 January 1991

GUATEMALA : Mario SALAZAR  
Julio LOPEZ

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Amnesty International is concerned at a serious incident in which two street educators with Casa Alianza (Covenant House), an organization working with street children in Guatemala, were reportedly threatened with fire arms by plainclothes policemen.

On 25 January, at about 11am, street educators Mario Salazar and Julio López were giving first aid to a group of about 20 street children in the Barajuste market in Guatemala City. The street educators were approached by two men in plain clothes who refused to identify themselves, but whom the children recognized as policemen. The men held a gun against the head of Julio López and against the head of a 14-year-old child, José Luis González, whom they also kicked in the stomach. They then forcefully took Mario Salazar and Julio López away, on foot. A group of children followed the men to the headquarters of the National Police, where the street educators were taken, while the other children ran to tell Casa Alianza staff what had happened. Mario Salazar and Julio López were reportedly taken to the narcotics section of the National Police, but their arrests were at that time denied by two officials.

Some hours later, however, both street educators were released. They said they had been questioned and verbally abused. Although no specific threats were issued, they were told "*Ustedes son muy brincones*" ("you make too much of a fuss"), which they took as a reference to Casa Alianza's recent efforts to press for investigations of human rights violations against street children. Their arrests were reportedly not registered in the police log book. The two street educators also said the Police tried to make them sign a document stating that the incident was just a "misunderstanding" "so that you don't tell Bruce (Bruce Harris, Casa Alianza director) and he does not come to file a complaint" ("*para que no hablen con Bruce y él no venga a hacer una denuncia*"), but both Mario Salazar and Julio López refused. A complaint of abuse of authority and kidnapping was filed.

The reported attack on street educators Mario Salazar and Julio López is the latest in a series of attacks and harassment of staff working with agencies attempting to help street children. In October 1989 a former employee of one such agency, René Geovanny Soto García, was found dead after having been seized by men in plain clothes. In June 1990 a young boy who had worked with Casa Alianza was murdered by a Treasury Police agent in an incident believed to be related to his work with street children. In recent months, further incidents of harassment and assaults upon street educators carried out by the police were reported to Amnesty International. On 4 December 1990, five armed men, one of whom wore an olive green military sweater, tried to abduct street educator Axel Mejía as he arrived at his home in Guatemala City. Also, in recent months, the director of Casa Alianza has reported receiving a series of death threats directed at him and other members of his staff.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International has been deeply disturbed in recent months at reports of human rights abuses, including harassment, threats, attacks and beatings, torture and apparent "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions carried out against street children by Guatemala City police, acting sometimes in uniform and sometimes in plain clothes. According to non-governmental sources in Guatemala there are some 5,000 children, aged five to 18 years, living on the streets of Guatemala City.

Many are orphaned, abandoned or handicapped; they search for food among the garbage and sleep under parked cars or on sidewalks. Some were displaced by the army counter-insurgency campaigns of the early 1980s; others were forced into the streets for other reasons. Most reportedly survive by stealing, begging and prostitution.

Some of the young victims of human rights violations have been involved in street crime. However, crime control can never be used as an excuse for violating the basic human rights of children, including the right to life.

Investigations into a number of reported abuses appear to have stalled. Amnesty International is concerned that failure by the authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice could serve to encourage further such abuses. It is also concerned that witnesses to violations, those who try and protect the children, such as Mario Salazar and Julio López, appear to be in danger of reprisals.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters:**

- expressing concern at the recent threat with firearms and detention of Mario Salazar and Julio López by plainclothes policemen;
- calling for their protection and for the protection of all those working to protect street children;
- asking that this and all incidents involving attacks or on threats against staff working with street children be investigated and perpetrators be brought to justice.

**APPEALS TO:**

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**COPIES TO:**

- Casa Alianza, Apartado 400, Antigua, Guatemala, Guatemala
- Procurador de Derechos Humanos, Avenida Simeón Cañas 10-61, Zona 2, Guatemala, Guatemala
- Sr. Primer Jefe, Oficina de Responsabilidad Profesional de la Policía Nacional, 6 Avenida 13-71, Zona 1, Guatemala, Guatemala

and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala in your country

**PLEASE BRING TO THE ATTENTION OF CHILDREN'S INTEREST GROUPS, AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S GROUPS.**

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 12 March 1991.