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## **Amnesty International urges the governments of the Americas to take concrete steps to protect those seeking to bring about the freedom and justice so often promised by officials**

**In a new report the organization describes the harassment faced by human rights defenders in Latin America despite government rhetoric about democracy and human rights**

Guatemala City -- Being a human rights defender in Latin America can be a dangerous undertaking and even end in death, says an Amnesty International report published in Guatemala on the occasion of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS).

“The governments of the Americas keep on promising freedom and justice but at the same time in many countries those working to improve the human rights of their fellow citizens are facing constant harassment ,” Amnesty International reported.

The report, entitled “More Protection, Less Persecution”, examines the methods used by governments and agents of the State to silence defenders and conceal the truth about violations of human rights. It goes on to describe cases of defenders who, between 1996 and 1999, suffered killings, torture, threats, unfair trials, false charges and restrictions on their activities or on their access to information.

In its report, Amnesty International makes eleven specific recommendations to the OAS and the governments of the Americas about how they can better protect and support the work of those who are trying to bridge the gap between government rhetoric about human rights and the day-to-day reality. The recommendations call for:

- public and unequivocal recognition of the legitimacy of the work of defenders;
- the establishment of a system whereby non-governmental organizations can have consultative status at the OAS;
- support for the establishment of the post of Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; and
- the implementation of effective measures to protect human rights defenders.

The Amnesty International report highlights the situation in **Colombia**, where over twenty defenders lost their lives between 1997 and 1998, mainly at the hands of the security forces and their paramilitary allies but also at the hands of armed opposition groups. Killings of defenders also took place in **Brazil** and two well-known defenders were killed in **Honduras** and **Guatemala**. So far the very impunity against which those who were murdered were fighting has prevailed in the investigations into their deaths. A large number of defenders have had to flee their homes, and in some cases have had to leave their countries, in order to save their lives. This has happened particularly in **Brazil** and **Colombia**, as well as in **Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico** and **Peru**.

Amnesty International points out that in some cases the harassment they have suffered has been carried out by legal means, through bringing politically-motivated or false criminal charges

against them and subjecting them to unfair trials. In several countries of the region, deliberate campaigns have been conducted against them in an attempt to tarnish their reputation and undermine the credibility of their work for human rights.

Amnesty International also points to the lack of political will on the part of the authorities to investigate reports of threats made to defenders and cites several cases in which killings could have been prevented if action had been taken.

More serious still, the report shows that in some cases the deaths of human rights defenders could have been avoided if the authorities had investigated incidents of harassment which occurred before they were killed. For example, despite international appeals on their behalf, the Colombian authorities did nothing to protect Dr Josué Giraldo Cardona before he was murdered in October 1996 or Dr Eduardo Umaña Mendoza, who was murdered in April 1998. The same thing happened in the case of the well-known Brazilian ecologist Francisco “Chico” Mendes.

Amnesty International believes that it is absolutely essential for all governments to make it a priority to grant protection and legitimacy to human rights organizations and other organizations of a social nature. In its report, it describes the types of restrictions and obstacles that sometimes impede the activities of NGOs and international human rights observers, as in the cases of **Mexico** and **Cuba**.

“Sadly, those who are trying to combat impunity in Latin America themselves often end up becoming its victims”, said Amnesty International.

“If human rights organizations working at a national or international level face serious obstacles in carrying out their work, then it is more than likely that locally-based groups will face even greater difficulties”, the organization pointed out.

The difficulties they encounter in doing their work are compounded by the difficulties they face in trying to get justice done. In many countries, procedures established under domestic law for investigating human rights violations are still weak and suffer from structural deficiencies. Violations are not investigated by an independent body and often the results of investigations are not made public. In countries such as **Brazil**, **Colombia** and **Mexico**, for example, abuses committed by members of the armed forces still fall under the jurisdiction of special military courts.

“The passing of a strong resolution on defenders by the OAS General Assembly would be a very positive step, although how committed to protecting defenders governments really are will only be revealed when they translate the contents of the resolution into concrete measures.” ENDS.../