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GUATEMALA: VIOLATIONS OF THE PAST CONTINUE

The killings that have plagued Guatemala for decades are still going on despite the promises of the civilian government, Amnesty International reports today.

"The government may have changed, but the violations are going on, as they did in the past," said the human rights organization. "The president who promised to protect human rights has singularly failed to do so."

In its report launched today, Amnesty International cites cases of "disappearances", extrajudicial executions and torture. The victims include street children, human rights workers, journalists, indigenous peasants and trade unionists - following the patterns of old.

"The number of political killings by government forces has gone down - but we have yet to see whether this will be a lasting improvement," said Amnesty International. "Sadly, the odds are against it. Harassment, intimidation and death threats are on the increase, violators from the past are still walking free and the repressive structures are still in place."

There have been some limited positive developments, such as a few convictions of human rights violators and the establishment of a presidential commission to coordinate policy on human rights. But despite this, people are still being killed by the security forces. Some have been shot dead or seized by the security forces in uniform, others have been killed by "death squads", the military operating out of uniform, a well-known stratagem intended to disguise their guilt. Still others have been killed by civil patrols - supposedly volunteer civilian groups, but in fact acting under military control. In the latest bid to obscure responsibility, recent victims of extrajudicial executions have been stabbed or shot using weapons not usually issued to the military.

As usual, the government has sought to cover up the extent of its own responsibility by claiming that victims were part of armed opposition groups operating in Guatemala. These allegations are often made with little or no evidence against whole communities of indigenous peasants, for example, or against human rights workers seeking to find out the truth about past violations.

Several members of just one human rights monitoring organization have been killed, amid public accusations from President Jorge Serrano Elias that they work for the armed opposition. The Council of Ethnic Communities "We are all Equal" (CERJ) was formed in 1988 to protect the rights of indigenous peoples: since then, more than 15 CERJ members have been extrajudicially executed, a further seven have "disappeared" and scores have been harassed or intimidated by the security forces.

In January last year, the CERJ's president, Amilcar Mendez Urizar, was named in a death threat, signed by a "death squad". In May a grenade exploded outside his home and his sister received a telephone call saying it had been a warning. Later that month, another member, Esteban Tojin, "disappeared" - he too had received death threats. The death threats against CERJ members continued all year and in November the President again accused Amilcar Mendez of links with the armed opposition.

Amnesty International has documented numerous cases in Guatemala where those named by government representatives as having links with armed opposition have subsequently become the targets of human rights violations, including extrajudicial execution, "disappearance" or torture.

Said Amnesty International: "This kind of accusation by the President highlights the contempt which sectors of the government

show toward human rights groups - a contempt which puts human rights workers' lives at risk."

Amnesty International believes that significant changes must be brought about by the government if there is ever to be an end to the political killings in Guatemala. It has submitted a list of 17 recommendations to the government, many of them aimed at bringing those responsible for past abuses to justice, as well as preventing future violations.

"In 1993, the government of Guatemala has an ideal opportunity to stop the killings," said the organization. "In June this year there will be a United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, which will have a particular focus on the rights of indigenous people and children - typical victims of violations in Guatemala. In addition, the whole year is designated UN Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples.

"The government claims it wants to stop these violations - in 1993, with the eyes of the world looking at these issues, this is surely the time for it to do so."

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