

## **Guatemala: The United States must urge President Portillo to end impunity**

*Amnesty International expressed concern today at the grave and deteriorating human rights situation in Guatemala, in open letters to both US President George Bush and his Guatemalan counterpart, Alfonso Portillo, ahead of their scheduled meeting today, 5 July in Washington DC.*

*In the letters, Amnesty International detailed a number of recent human rights abuses directed against the Guatemalan judiciary, journalists, and human rights workers, both Guatemalan and foreign in the past several months. "The most recent wave of abuses must be investigated, including the attempted kidnapping suffered by a member of an Amnesty International delegation to Guatemala in June 2001," the organization said.*

*According to spokespersons for the US White House, President Bush intends to praise President Portillo's human rights record. Amnesty International considers this position to be inappropriate in view of the recent pattern of serious human rights violations in Guatemala. In its open letters, Amnesty International recalls that during a visit to Central America in 1999, former President Bill Clinton apologised for past US support to the forces of repression in Guatemala, and pledged that "The United States must not repeat that mistake."*

*"President Portillo and the international community, including the United States, must do everything possible in order to avoid a renewed human rights crisis in Guatemala," the human rights organization said..*

Amongst the measures urged by Amnesty International are an end to impunity, protection for human rights workers and implementation of the human rights related recommendations of both the Guatemalan Peace Accords which ended the country's long-term civil conflict in 1996, and those of the UN-sponsored Historical Verification Commission, established under the Accords.

Amnesty International has sent similar messages to a number of other officials and agencies with whom President Portillo is scheduled to meet, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Organization of American States (OAS). The human rights organization understands that during their meeting on 3 July, OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria praised President Portillo's leadership in the conviction last month of three military men for the extrajudicial execution of human rights advocate Bishop Juan Gerardi in 1998.

Amnesty International also welcomed this conviction, but noted that it had come at a high price: a dozen people involved in the case, including a judge and prosecutor, have fled the country fearing for their lives. Dozens more, including the prosecutor, the presiding judge and lawyers acting on behalf of the Archbishop's Human Rights Office (*Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala*), have reported intimidation and threats. Nine potential witnesses have been eliminated.

"The convictions in this case did send a good signal." However, "the perpetrators of the some 200,000 extrajudicial executions and 'disappearances' carried out by the security forces and their civilian allies, as well as the more than 600 massacres of indigenous villages virtually wiped off the face of the earth have still not answered for their crimes," Amnesty International said.

## **Background**

Human rights organizations most recently targeted for threats, raids and attacks and listed in AI's open letters to Presidents Bush and Portillo and to IMF, BID and OAS officials included the Archbishop's Human Rights Office (ODHAG), (*Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala*), the Citizens Movement for Justice and Democracy (*Movimiento Ciudadano por la Justicia y Democracia*), the Relatives of the "Disappeared" People of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), *Familiares de los ADesaparecidos@ de Guatemala*, the Shantytown Dwellers Association for Homes and Development (FREPOGUA), *Frente de Pobladores de Guatemala por la Vivienda y el Desarrollo*, and the Centre for Studies, Information and Basis for Social Action, (CEIBAS), *Centro de Estudios, Investigaci\`n y Bases para la Acci\`n Social*. Abuses against journalists and judicial officials involved in a range of high profile efforts to end impunity in Guatemala were also detailed.

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