

AI INDEX: AMR 34/26/98
16 JULY 1998

Guatemala: Renewed controversy over Bishop Gerardi's murder heightens fear for security of human rights defenders

Guatemalan human rights defenders, particularly those involved in the renewed and heated controversy over responsibility for Bishop Gerardi's murder, are facing an increased risk of human rights violations, Amnesty International said today.

The new dispute over the yet unsolved murder of the Bishop of Guatemala City, Juan José Gerardi Condeera last April, flared following statements made during a 13 July press conference in Spain by a Guatemalan church delegation visiting Europe.

At the Madrid press conference, the Human Rights Office of The Archbishopric (ODHA) charged that there probably was evidence to directly implicate the military in Monsignor Gerardi's murder. Retorting to ODHA's allegations, the Guatemalan army denied that military personnel had been involved in the Bishop's death, and said that it reserved the right to initiate legal proceedings against anyone making unfounded accusations against military officials.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Próspero Penados del Barrio confirmed that all the information, including that about the two probable military officers involved, had already been made available to the special commission appointed by the government to investigate Monsignor Gerardi's death. The Archbishop also called for the office of the Presidential Chief of Staff to be investigated to see if it was behind the increased monitoring of church officials' telephones and posts which had occurred since the assassination.

The delegation is in Europe under the sponsorship of Amnesty International and other human rights organisations and agencies, to publicise the Guatemalan church's inter-diocesan Recuperation of the Historical Memory Project (REMHI) and to press for continued international concern that the circumstances of Bishop Gerardi's death be fully clarified.

The REMHI report itself, based on the study of more than 55,000 human rights violations suffered in Guatemala over the 36 year period of civil conflict in that country, had identified the security forces as responsible for some 79% of the abuses investigated.

These new developments between ODHA and the military could lead to further intimidation or acts of violence against human rights defenders and others involved in the historical clarification process, @ Amnesty International fears. "We urgently call on the Guatemalan authorities to take all necessary steps to ensure the security of all those concerned, and to press forward with the inquiries into Bishop Gerardi's murder. @

Background

Monsignor Gerardi, Coordinator of the ODHA office, was murdered on 26 April this year, two days after he presided over presentation of ODHA's Historical Memory Project report. In the days immediately following his death, a number of church personnel and human rights defenders -- including several involved in the REMHI project -- received death threats. ENDS.../

For further information or to arrange an interview, please phone Soraya Bermejo, Press Officer, on +44 171 413 5562