

GUATEMALA

@Trade Unionists & Political Activists Targeted under the New Government

INTRODUCTION

Amnesty International is seriously concerned at a renewed wave of repression against popular movements in Guatemala, including trade union leaders and members, since the government of Jorge Serrano Elías took office in January 1991. During April and May 1991, over 18 leaders of popular and trade union movements in Guatemala went into exile after receiving death threats. The fact that at least one trade unionist was killed in April makes the death threats very real. Others have suffered intimidation, abduction and torture. The choice of victim, the manner in which the abuses were carried out and the weapons used suggest those responsible are members of the official security forces in the guise of so-called "death squads". Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of a number of trade union leaders who have been threatened or subjected to other abuses.

Sources in Guatemala link this new wave of repression against trade union and political movements to their decision not to participate in the government-proposed "Pacto Social" ("Social Pact")¹. In late January 1991, President Jorge Serrano held meetings with the trade union sector and the private sector in order to set up a "Social Pact" between unions and employers in Guatemala. Many trade unions subsequently decided not to participate in the "Social Pact", because they believed that it was not representative of all sectors of Guatemalan society. The unions later maintained that subsequent large numbers of lay-offs and dismissals in the public sector, as well as increased incidents of human rights violations, were incompatible with the government's stated aims for the social pact, namely to set up a framework for peace and change in Guatemalan society. Government spokesmen reportedly subsequently publicly accused those who refused to participate in the "Social Pact" as having links with armed opposition groups, and it was reported that President Serrano himself publicly stated that "los sindicatos opositores son únicamente frentes de la insurgencia" ("opposition unions are nothing more than fronts for national insurgency movements"). In the past, public statements by officials characterizing individuals or organizations as "extremists" have been followed by severe reprisals against those named in the form of torture, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution.

INDIVIDUAL CASES

¹ The "Social Pact" is a government proposed agreement between trade unions and employers to provide a framework for future union-employer relations.

A leading political figure, **Marco Tulio Dieguez**, Assistant Secretary General of the Executive Committee of the Guatemalan Christian Democrat Party and candidate for deputy during the last Congressional election, reported in May 1991 that he has been receiving death threats for over two months. He believes he is being threatened because of his criticism of the government's proposed "Social Pact", and because he denounced the assassination in late April of **Dinora José Pérez Valdez**.

Dinora Pérez, aged 28, a member of the board of the Fundación de Proyectos del Área Rural para Guatemala (FUNDAGUA), Rural Projects Foundation for Guatemala, and a leading trade union figure, was killed on 29 April 1991 by two heavily armed men on a motorcycle in Zone 7 of Guatemala City. Dinora Pérez' killing, which many believed to be politically motivated, was widely condemned inside and outside Guatemala (See UA 149/91, AI Index: AMR 34/14/91 of 2 May 1991). Father Andrés Girón, the President of the Human Rights Commission of the National Congress, publicly stated that her killing had been carried out by "grupos paramilitares que buscan cortar las cabezas de los líderes sindicales y políticos que desean alcanzar en Guatemala un sistema de justicia social" ("paramilitary groups who are trying to eliminate political and trade union leaders who desire social justice in Guatemala"). Since the killing of Dinora Pérez, other members of the political movement Movimiento Político Guatemala Unida (Political Movement for a United Guatemala), of which Dinora Pérez was a leading member, as well as members of FUNDAGUA, have been threatened and forced into exile.

Among FUNDAGUA members forced to leave the country as a result of threats to their lives was **Dr. Luis Zurita Tablada**, the Director of FUNDAGUA, vice-presidential candidate for the Partido Socialista Democrático (PSD), Democratic Socialist Party, during the 1985 elections and founder member of the Political Movement for a United Guatemala. Recent press reports publicizing the threats against FUNDAGUA members carried a photograph of FUNDAGUA leaders and collaborators, including the late Dinora Pérez. Shortly after its publication in mid-May 1991, FUNDAGUA member **Irene Dieguez**, aged 35, included in the above photograph, began to receive death threats. Irene Dieguez is a secretary with the Municipalidad de Guatemala (Municipality of Guatemala), Coordinator of the Association of Sales Representatives, and Coordinator of the Grupo de Mujeres del Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social (Women's Group of Guatemalan Institute of Social Security). The caller in this instance left a message for Irene with a friend, which said "dígale a sus compañeras Eva e Irene que sus días estan contados y que las tenemos bien controladas, y están en nuestra lista" ("tell your friends Irene and Eva [see below] that their days are numbered, that they are being closely watched, and that they are on our list"). On the same day, 22 May 1991 Irene Dieguez herself received a similar call at her office. She believes that her participation in FUNDAGUA, and in the Political Movement for a United Guatemala may have been the reasons why she is being targeted. **Eva Judith Gálvez**, a very close friend of Irene Dieguez, and a member of the independent Asociación de Representantes de Venta (Association of Sales Representatives), was approached in the street

by five youths on 17 May 1991, who asked her if her name were Eva. A few days later, on 20 May, she received an anonymous telephone call at her office. The caller said that they were watching her and that she only had a few days left to live. Eva Gálvez has subsequently left the country to go into exile.

Amnesty International has learned of several other women trade union representatives who were reportedly targeted in late-May 1991 because of their trade union activities. **Sonia Haydee Argueta Sis**, a street vendor in Guatemala City, reported receiving anonymous telephone calls telling her to stop organizing street vendors and to leave the country. Two other women union representatives, **Miriam Pliego** and **Carolina Méndez** were also reportedly threatened in late-May. Miriam Pliego was shot at from a passing vehicle, and armed men went to the home of Carolina Méndez looking for her.

On 21 March 1991, **Aura Violeta Flores Acevedo**, Secretaria de Orden y Disciplina (Secretary of Order and Discipline) of the Sindicato de Trabajadores del Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (SITRACUDE), Union of Workers of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, was detained on 21 March 1991 by several armed men who broke into her home in the middle of the night. She was taken to an unknown location, where she was reportedly interrogated about the trade union activities of her colleagues. Her captors reportedly threatened her and threatened to kidnap her children if the other leaders of the union did not leave the country within 72 hours. She was subsequently released. After publicly denouncing her abduction, she reported that members of the National Police visited her home asking her to sign documents from the Ministry of Interior, stating that she had been abducted by members of her own union. In a press conference she stated that she was told that if she did not sign the documents she would have 48 hours to leave the country or she would be abducted again. She has since left Guatemala to go into exile. On the day prior to her abduction, unidentified armed men, driving a vehicle with polarized windows opened fire on a vehicle belonging to two leaders of SITRACUDE, **Fernando Lucero** and **Luis Ramírez**. Neither of the two men were hurt in the attack. SITRACUDE members began receiving threats after the union occupied the Ministry of Culture headquarters towards the end of January 1991, to protest the lay-off of union members at the Ministry.

Wosveli Castro, Secretary General of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Automotriz de Centro América (STIACASA), Union of Workers of the Central American Motorized Industries was abducted by two armed men in civilian clothes on 16 May 1991, while on his way to the United States of America's Consulate in Guatemala City in order to obtain a visa. He also served as Secretary General of the Federación de Trabajadores de la Metalmeccánica de Guatemala (FETRAMEGUA), Federation of Guatemalan Mechanical Workers. According to his testimony, he was bundled into a car in which two more heavily armed men were waiting. He was bound by his hands and his feet and his sweater was used to cover his eyes. Still inside the car, he was kicked and beaten and interrogated about his trade union activities, particularly about his participation in the

recent Marcha de la Dignidad por el Derecho a la Vida al Trabajo y la Paz (March for Dignity and the Right to Life, Work and Peace), which took place from 26-29 April, covering over 116 kilometres from Patulul, Suchitepéquez department, to Guatemala city. The march was organized by the Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala (UNSI TRAGUA), Labour Union of Guatemalan Workers,² and Wosveli Castro had taken part in the first phase of the march on 26 April.

The interrogators informed Wosveli Castro that they knew he had taken part in the march and asked about the whereabouts of two trade unionists who had been on the march with him. They accused him of trying to escape from the country "ya te nos habías perdido...Te nos querías ir del país" ("we thought we had lost you...so you were going to leave the country, were you?"). After being held and severely beaten for over five hours, he was left abandoned, tied by his hands and feet, on a road leading to neighbouring El Salvador. Wosveli Castro, who has since returned to his home in Quetzaltenango department, reported that he had been threatened with death if he denounced what had happened to him. Although he was unable to identify his abductors, it is believed they may have been members of the security forces, because of the manner in which the abduction was carried out.

Sergio Guzmán and **Bryon Morales**, Coordinator of International Relations and Organizing Coordinator, respectively, of UNSI TRAGUA, have also reported being among the many other trade unionists threatened with death in April and May 1991. Byron Morales reported that he received a telephone call telling him he had 48 hours to leave the country. In another incident, a trade unionist belonging to UNSI TRAGUA was approached on the street by unknown men who told her to tell the UNSI TRAGUA leaders that "los tenemos controlados, sabemos dónde viven y cómo se mueven y ya les va a llegar su hora" ("we have them under surveillance, we know where they live and how they operate and their time will soon come").

The Secretary General of the Unión Internacional de Trabajadores de la Alimentación y Afines (UITA), International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations, in Guatemala, Rodolfo Robles also reported harassment of UITA members. The offices of UITA have been under surveillance by armed men. In one instance on 8 June 1991, men in plain clothes, believed to be members of the security forces openly filmed all those entering and leaving the UITA offices.

² UNSI TRAGUA is made up of trade union groups principally from Guatemala's industrial sector but also including two large banana workers' unions. UNSI TRAGUA is very active in union organization and training of union leaders.

Members of the Federación de Asociaciones de Sindicatos del Estado de Guatemala (FENASTEG), Federation of Associations of Guatemalan State Workers' Unions, have also reported receiving threats, after they protested the recent dismissal of state employees and demanded an increase in salary. **Doria Arriaza**, a leader of FENASTEG, recently left the country after several armed men attempted to abduct her on 14 May 1991 in Guatemala City. She had also previously received repeated death threats by telephone.

Members of the Sindicato de Trabajadores del Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social (STIGSS), Union of Workers at the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security, have also been subjected to harassment, and in some cases short-term imprisonment. Members of the ad-hoc strike committee of STIGSS, including **Víctor Alvarado, Nery Barrios, Edgar Ovalle, María del Carmen Menendez and José Luis Pinzón**, received death threats after they had been previously detained, along with 50 other union members, as a result of strike action during March and April. The government condemned the strike, and the Procurador de los Derechos Humanos (Human Rights Procurator), Lic. Ramiro de León Carpio reportedly accused strikers of violating the human rights of other Guatemalans. Several of the leaders subsequently left the country as a result of threats against their lives. Nery Barrios, cited above, who remains in Guatemala, has reported that he continues to receive threats. He reported that men have been watching his house in Quetzaltenango.

Among other government employees to be targeted are members of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Aduanas (STA), Customs' Union Workers, whose leaders reportedly received death threats and were told to leave the country. Leaders of the union believe the threats are related to denunciations made by the union to the President of Guatemala, Ing. Jorge Serrano Elías, of corruption among customs officials.