

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI index: AMR 34/038/2002 (Public)

News Service No.: 100

13 June 2002

Guatemala: Stop the harassment and attacks on human rights defenders

The Guatemalan Government must take effective action to stop the violence and acts of intimidation being faced by members of the country's human rights community, Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists and Human Rights Watch said today.

In the last few months, non-governmental organizations in Guatemala have been subjected to an alarming number of acts of intimidation and they have even carried on since the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Hina Jilani, visited the country.

"There is every indication that there is a pattern to these incidents suggesting they could be part of an organized campaign to intimidate those who are committed to documenting the human rights violations committed in the past and bringing those responsible to justice," Amnesty International said.

For many years the situation of human rights defenders in Guatemala has been of enormous concern to the international community which has repeatedly called for the protection of the work of those who, often at risk to their own lives, fight for human rights to be observed.

"In all societies, the independent work carried out by civil society contributes significantly towards ensuring that governments protect human rights and act within the framework of national and international law," the International Commission of Jurists noted while pointing out that in 1998 the United Nations General Assembly recognized the importance of this contribution by adopting the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

"It is essential that the Guatemalan authorities guarantee maximum protection for defenders and commit themselves to investigating all incidents of threats and harassment and bringing those responsible to justice," Human Rights Watch added.

In particular the three organizations are calling on President Alfonso Portillo to do everything possible to:

- Ensure that those in charge of investigating these crimes have all the necessary material and technical resources and staff at their disposal to be able to pursue thoroughly all lines of investigation;
- Ensure that the investigators receive full cooperation from all State institutions, especially the security forces;
- Enable the organizations of civil society to participate actively in the investigations by keeping them informed of the progress of each investigation.

"Unfortunately, such threats are nothing new and their violent tone recalls a time not so long ago in Guatemalan history when very serious abuses were committed," the three organizations continued. "It is time for the Guatemalan Government to turn over this sad page in the history of the country and to take all necessary measures to protect all those who are working for the human rights of everyone and

to strengthen respect for those rights within Guatemalan society, " they said in conclusion.

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