

## **Guatemala: Where are the children? The legacy of the "disappeared"**

*On International Children's Day -- Monday 20 November -- Amnesty International is hosting the visit of Adriana Portillo, a Guatemalan mother, who is visiting Geneva to bring her case to the UN Committee against Torture.*

*Adriana Portillo's two young children and an 18-month-old half sister were kidnapped and "disappeared" by the Guatemalan security forces in 1981. Other members of her family were also "disappeared" that day. Her case and her belief that "disappearance" constitutes a form of torture will be considered by the UN Committee against Torture on Tuesday 21 November.*

*On this day -- 21 November -- Guatemala will present its periodic report to the UN Committee against Torture at the Palais Wilson. Amnesty International has also submitted a report recommending that the UN Committee against Torture urge the Guatemalan government to establish a special commission to investigate the fate of "disappeared" Guatemalan children. Last year, the UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) recommended the creation of a special commission. The Guatemalan government has failed to comply with this recommendation.*

*Amnesty International is hosting the visit of Adriana Portillo in an attempt to raise global awareness of the enduring effects of state-orchestrated "disappearances" on the families of tens of thousands of victims, whose suffering is compounded by the failure of the Guatemalan government to adequately investigate the fate of their loved*

ones. Amnesty International believes that such failure is a violation of Guatemala's obligations under the UN Convention against Torture.

Adriana Portillo hopes her visit will stimulate UN bodies and international public opinion to bring pressure on the Guatemalan government to clarify the fate of the "disappeared" children.

Of the 6,159 disappearances cases on which the CEH received testimony, 11% were children. Until recently, it had been assumed that most were dead, buried in clandestine graves along with the tens of thousands of other victims of the repression. Indeed, 33% of the remains exhumed from mass graves between 1997 and 2000, were found to be those of children.

Remarkably, several "disappeared" Guatemalan children have recently been relocated. The knowledge that even a few of the "disappeared" children have been found alive fuels the hopes of people like Adriana Portillo that she too may find her children, or at least establish their fate, so that she no longer has to live in the uncertainty of not knowing. This, she has described to Amnesty International, is the worst torture of all.

"These 19 years have been the greatest torture there could ever be ... years of agony, desperation, anguish, pain ... I think the worst thing which could happen to me is never finding out what happened," said Adriana Portillo. "This is the perfection of torture."

### **Background**

Six members of Adriana Portillo's family were "disappeared" by the Guatemalan security forces on 11 September 1981, including her 18-month-old half-sister and her two daughters Rosaura (10 years old) and Glenda (9 years old). She accepts she cannot expect to see her aged father, her-step-mother or her sister-in-law again. But she has lived

for 19 years in the hope that the children may have been adopted and may be alive today.

The UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) -- agreed under the 1996 Peace Accords that finally ended the conflict in Guatemala -- estimated that some 200,000 people were "disappeared" or killed during the civil conflict. It concluded that the vast majority of the abuses had been carried out by the Guatemalan security services or the civil patrols, in the course of the military's brutal counter-insurgency campaign of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Adriana Portillo's visit to Geneva takes place in the context of Amnesty International's recently launched year-long Campaign against Torture (<http://www.stoptorture.org>)

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#### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

**Press Conference:** The press conference takes place at 11:00 a.m. (local time) Monday 20 November 2000, in Palais de Nations, Geneva.

**Speakers:** Adriana Portillo, Tracy Ulltveit-Moe (Amnesty International Researcher on Guatemala), Melinda Ching (Amnesty International UN Representative, Geneva)

**Photographs:** Colour photographs of the three "disappeared" children will be available in hard copy at the press conference or electronically via [skobrin@amnesty.org](mailto:skobrin@amnesty.org)

**Interview Requests:** Adriana Portillo, who has recently founded an organization called "Where are the Children?/Watch", will be available for interview (in English or Spanish) immediately following the press conference. To book an interview, please contact Som Leung at the Amnesty International UN Geneva office. Tel: 022-798 2500, or call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566. website: <http://www.amnesty.org>