

UA 492/90

Extrajudicial Executions

5 December 1990

GUATEMALA: Residents of Santiago Atitlán

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at reports that soldiers at the Panabaj military base at Santiago Atitlán, Sololá opened fire on a crowd of unarmed people on the evening of 2 December, killing at least 15 villagers including three minors, one of them aged 10, and wounding 19 others including a number of children.

According to eyewitness reports, the events which culminated in the killings began on the evening of 2 December 1990 when soldiers from the Panabaj military base, allegedly under the influence of alcohol, broke into the home of a local resident, Andrés Sapocú Jabuychán, and tried to rob him. When Sapocú Jabuychán resisted, the soldiers are said to have opened fire, killing or wounding a child (according to some accounts, Sr. Sapocú Jabuychán was also shot and he too may have been killed). When neighbours learned of the incident, they reportedly rang the bells of the town church to summon other villagers.

Between 1500 and 2000 people are said to have gathered in the town square, before converging on the Panabaj military base where they intended to protest the incident. They were accompanied by the town's mayor who reportedly agreed to participate only after he gained the group's agreement to his condition that they carry only white flags.

Survivors of the incident who have been interviewed in hospital by local human rights groups insist that the villagers were indeed peaceful and unarmed when they arrived at the base at approximately 1am and asked to speak to the commander. In response, soldiers at the base reportedly opened fire.

Amnesty International understands that the commander of the base was removed from his position shortly after the shooting and that the official now in command, Subteniente Julio César Andrino, has reportedly declined to say whether the army had shot at the civilians, but did accuse the group of trying to take over the barracks and of provoking the incident by opening fire on the soldiers.

The government has issued a statement lamenting the incident and promising an exhaustive inquiry into it.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty international does not condone the use of violence by demonstrators in any circumstances, and is mindful of the need of soldiers to defend themselves if attacked. However, numerous eyewitnesses interviewed by the press and both Guatemalan and foreign human rights investigatory agencies have all concurred that the villagers fired upon were peaceful and unarmed.

Over many years reports of human rights abuses by the army have been received from the Santiago Atitlán area in the department of Sololá, where there is an army base. According to foreigners living and travelling in the area, it is now under strict military control.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters:

- urging that the terms of reference and composition of the investigatory body, that will carry out the inquiry promised by the government, be made immediately public, that its findings be made known as soon as they are available;

- urging that any criminal acts found to have been committed be referred to the tribunals;
- asking that the soldiers responsible for the shooting at the home of Sr. Sapocú Jabuychán be identified and dealt with in accordance with the law;
- asking that steps be taken to ensure that all those injured in the attack at the military base receive adequate medical care;
- seeking assurances that the physical integrity of all witnesses to both incidents be guaranteed and that the relatives of the victims be offered appropriate compensation.

APPEALS TO:

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and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 16 January 1991.