

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Attempted Abduction

13 December 1990

GUATEMALA: Axel MEJIA, street educator

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On 4 December 1990 at about 9pm, an attempt was made to abduct Axel Mejía as he arrived at his home in Zone 7 of Guatemala City. His would-be abductors were five armed men driving a light blue vehicle, the licence plate number of which was noted. One wore an olive green military issue sweater. The man's family were able to intervene on his behalf and prevented him from being seized. They have reported that the car involved in the attempted kidnapping had been seen parked in front of their home the previous week-end.

Axel Mejía works as a street educator with Covenant House, (Casa Alianza), an organization which works with street children in Guatemala and has been in the forefront of efforts to investigate recent police abuses against children, including harassment, torture, "disappearance" and killings. Axel Mejía had been the principal witness to an incident which occurred on 7 November 1990, when thirteen members of the SIPROCI, Sistema de Protección Cívica (System of Civil Protection), and of the security forces, (four National Policemen, five members of the Treasury Police and 4 Military Police) beat three street children in front of a refuge run by Casa Alianza. The agency reported the incident to the authorities immediately, and that same evening the head of the Treasury Police brought the five members of the Treasury Police who had been involved to the Casa Alianza refuge where Axel identified the principal aggressor. Legal proceedings have now been initiated against this Treasury Police agent for his assault upon the children, and it is Axel's key role in the proceedings as principal witness that is believed to have precipitated this attack.

The attack on street educator Axel Mejía came in the wake of increasing reports of harassment of staff working with agencies attempting to help street children. In October 1989 a former employee of one such agency, René Geovanni Soto García was found dead after having been seized by men in plain clothes. In June 1990 a young boy who had worked with Casa Alianza was murdered by a Treasury Police agent in an incident believed to be related to his work with street children. In recent months, further incidents of harassment and assaults upon street educators carried out by the police were reported to Amnesty International. On a number of occasions, the street educators were attacked when they attempted to stop police beating street children. The photograph reproduced below was taken in the context of one such incident which occurred in September. In recent months, the director of Casa Alianza, a foreign national, has also reported receiving a series of death threats directed at him and his staff.

These two street children, aged 11 and 13, were beaten by police, hand-cuffed and thrown into this police van on 20 September 1990. The street educator who attempted to stop the beating and who took this picture was himself beaten and briefly taken into custody. His camera was confiscated, but later returned to him with the film intact by police who reportedly explained that they were doing this because "We are getting too many letters from Amnesty International". The child on the left was a witness to the fatal attack on street child Nahamán Carmona López in March. (See UA 294/90, AMR 34/43/90, 10 July 1990 and follow-up AMR 34/45/90, 26 July 1990; UA 436/90, AMR 34/67/90, 30 October; and Extrajudicial Executions and Human Rights Violations against Street Children in

Guatemala, AMR 34/37/90, July 1990 for further information on such abuses). Since he died, street children who witnessed the attack have been repeatedly harassed and beaten, in an apparent attempt to intimidate them into withdrawing their testimony about the case.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In recent months, Amnesty International has been deeply disturbed at reports of human rights abuses, including harassment, threats, attacks and beatings, torture and apparent "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions carried out against street children by Guatemala City police, acting sometimes in uniform and sometimes in plain clothes. According to non-governmental sources in Guatemala there are some 5,000 children, aged five to 18 years, living on the streets of Guatemala City. Many are orphaned, abandoned or handicapped; they search for food among the garbage and sleep under parked cars or on sidewalks. Some were displaced by the army counter-insurgency campaigns of the early 1980's; others were forced into the streets for other reasons. Most reportedly survive by stealing, begging and prostitution. Some of the young victims of human rights violations have been involved in street crime. However, crime control can never be used as an excuse for violating the basic human rights of children, including the right to life.

Investigations into a number of reported abuses appear to have stalled. Amnesty International is concerned that failure by the authorities to determine the perpetrators and bring them to justice could serve to encourage further such abuses. It is also concerned that witnesses to violations, those who try and protect the children, such as Axel Mejía, or those who press for inquiries into them, appear to be in danger of reprisals.

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

- calling for protection for Axel Mejía and all those working to protect street children;
- asking that this and all incidents involving attacks on or threats against staff working with street children be investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.

#### **APPEALS TO:**

S.E. Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo  
 Presidente de la República de Guatemala  
 Palacio Nacional  
 Guatemala, Guatemala  
**Tel: +502 22 1212, +502 22 2266**  
**Fax: +502 253 7472**  
**Telex: 5331 CAPRES GU**  
**Telegrams: Presidente Cerezo,**  
**Guatemala, Guatemala**

Sra. Claudia Arenas Bianchi  
 Secretaria de Relaciones Públicas  
 de la Presidencia  
 Palacio Nacional  
 Guatemala, Guatemala  
**Fax: +502 253 7472**  
**Telex: 5325 RELPUB GU**  
**Telegrams: Secretaria Relaciones**  
**Publicas, Guatemala, Guatemala**

Gen. Carlos Augusto Morales Villatoro  
 Cnel. Ministro de Gobernación  
 Despacho Ministerial  
 Oficina No. 8, Primer Nivel  
 Palacio Nacional  
 Guatemala, Guatemala  
**Tel: +502 2 21212/19, ext 500; 518105-6**  
**Fax: + 502 2 518105**  
**Telex: 5085 MINGOB GU**  
**Telegrams: Ministro Gobernación,**  
**Guatemala, Guatemala**

Julio Enrique Caballeros Seigné  
 Director General de la Policía Nacional  
 6 Avenida 13-71  
 Zona 1, Guatemala  
 Guatemala  
**Telegrams: Director Policia,**  
**Guatemala, Guatemala**  
**Tel: + 502 (2) 20221, 515158**

#### **COPIES TO:**

- Casa Alianza, Apartado 400, Antigua, Guatemala, GUATEMALA
- Sra. Marilys Barrientos de Estrada, Directora, Sección Familiar y de Menores, Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos, Avenida Simeón Cañas 10-60, Zona 2, Guatemala GUATEMALA
- Lic. Héctor Raúl Orellana Alarcón, Jefe de la Sección de Menores, Procuraduría General de la Nación, Ministerio Público, 8a Calle 2-73, Zona 1, 01001 Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA
- and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala in your country.

**PLEASE BRING TO THE ATTENTION OF CHILDREN'S INTEREST, AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S GROUPS.**

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat or your section office if sending appeals after 24 January 1991.