

EXTERNAL

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MEDICAL CONCERN

Killing of four prisoners

GUATEMALA

Within a period of approximately a week in October 1993, four prisoners were found dead in their cells in the Preventiva Prison in Zone 18, Guatemala City. The Guatemalan government initially claimed that all four had committed suicide; however, forensic examinations were then carried out by the Toxicology Department of the University of San Carlos. According to information given to Amnesty International, forensic investigators were reported in the press as having found that the deaths were caused by drugging with barbiturates followed by strangulation with a thin cord and hanging with towels.

The judge handling the case then stated that there was clear evidence of criminal involvement in the deaths and two guards and a sub-director of the prison have been jailed in connection with events surrounding the deaths.

The deaths occurred shortly after two prisoners - both ex-soldiers - claimed they had information on high level military involvement in the operations of death squads in Guatemala. There have been suggestions that the four were murdered as part of a campaign of intimidation to prevent these two ex-soldiers and several other imprisoned ex-soldiers from revealing what they claimed to know about the death squads. While there is no direct evidence to link the press statements by the two men with the deaths, the timing and nature of the deaths are highly suspicious and suggest that there may indeed be a link. One of the victims was a close friend of one of the ex-soldiers.

Convictions for human rights abuses are exceedingly rare in Guatemala and the testimony offered by the ex-soldiers, if true, would be a virtually unique opportunity to establish military responsibility for death squad killings. Amnesty International believes that investigations should continue until complete responsibility can be established for the four deaths in custody and for the abuses alleged by the ex-soldiers.

Background

On 11 October 1993, ex-soldiers Francisco Solbal Santay and Tiburcio Hernández Hernández held an extraordinary news conference at Pavoncito prison. Both are sentenced to lengthy prison terms for the murder of an American citizen, Michael Devine, in 1990. At the conference they stated that they had been ordered by higher ranking officers to carry out this killing and around 50 other similar killings while operating as part of a military death squad. They described how individuals considered by the army as "subversive" were tortured with electric shocks during interrogation and then stabbed or strangled to death and their bodies buried clandestinely.

The two prisoners reportedly said that they would name those involved, including military officers up to the rank of general. They subsequently withdrew their statements, saying that they had lied, apparently after receiving threats from the army high command. Other prisoners, again ex-soldiers with one exception, are also reported to have made similar allegations before subsequently retracting them.

The first death to occur after the news conference was that of Oliverio Angel Echeverría who was found hanging in his cell in mid-October 1993. He is not himself known to have made statements about the death squads, but had been close to one of the prisoners who had - ex-soldier Noel Jesús de Beteta Alvarez. The prison authorities initially claimed that his death was a suicide. However, his death was rapidly followed by three further deaths in the prison: Antonio Castillo Méndez and José Morales Campos, who are reported to have been found strangled in their cells, and, a few days later, Moisés Tun Toc who was found dead in his cell on 24 October.

The deaths led to very real concern for the lives of all prisoners, particularly those who claimed to have information on the death squads and also for that of Jorge Lemus, a common-law detainee who arranged the 11 October news conference at which the initial allegations were made. The prisoners appear to have retracted their statements after being threatened by a high-ranking military officer who visited them in prison. Jorge Lemus has since been moved to Pavoncito prison where he believes his life is in grave danger. The remaining prisoners are all still held in Preventiva Prison in Zone 18.

This is the first time known to Amnesty International since 1975 that soldiers imprisoned for criminal offences have threatened to implicate higher-ranking military officers in these abuses. On the last occasion in 1975 two police agents sentenced to death for the murder of a prominent Guatemalan threatened to talk and implicate others; they were however executed before making any disclosures.

Amnesty International is urging that every effort is made to establish responsibility for the deaths and to investigate the allegations made by the ex-soldiers that military personnel were involved in death squad killings. The organization is seeking assurances that adequate measures will be taken to protect the lives of all prisoners.

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To: Medical professionals
From: Medical Office / Research Department - Americas
Date: 20 December 1993

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

**Killing of four prisoners
GUATEMALA**

Keywords

Theme: Extrajudicial executions/prisoners/forensic investigations/army/death squads

Summary

In October 1993, within days of each other, four prisoners were found dead in their cells in the Preventiva Prison in Zone 18, Guatemala City. Although the authorities initially claimed that the deaths were all suicides, a subsequent independent forensic investigation found that all the prisoners had been drugged with barbiturates and appeared to have been murdered. It is believed that there may be a link between their deaths and statements made earlier that month by imprisoned ex-soldiers about the activities of military-operated death squads in Guatemala. Investigations are continuing. Please see the full details attached.

Recommended Actions

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses given below:

- expressing grave concern at the deaths of Moisés Tun Toc, Antonio Castillo Méndez, José Morales Campos and Oliverio Angel Echeverría in the Preventiva Prison in Zone 18, Guatemala City, in October 1993 and at reports that forensic investigations found that all four had been drugged with barbiturates and subsequently either strangled or hanged
- seeking further information on what forensic investigations have revealed about the cause of death in each instance
- ask if there is any evidence as to whether barbiturates were ingested or injected
- noting that it has been established that there was criminal involvement in all four deaths and seeking assurances that, in order to prevent any further such killings, investigation into the deaths will be intensified until full responsibility has been established
- asking what measures have been taken to protect prisoners, particularly those who earlier made statements about military involvement in human rights violations.

Addresses

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