

22 October 2001

Further information on UA 233/99 (AMR 41/23/99, 6 September 1999) and follow-up (AMR 41/24/99, 9 September 1999) - Fear for safety/death threats

MEXICO Digna Ochoa y Plácido (human rights lawyer)
Members of PRODH (human rights organisation)

New names: Pilar Noriega] high-profile human rights lawyers
Bárbara Zamora] who have worked with Digna Ochoa

Digna Ochoa y Plácido has been shot dead. Her body was found on 19 October at a legal office in the centre of Mexico City. The killers left a death threat warning other human rights defenders from the *Centro de Derechos Humanos "Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez"* (PRODH), Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre, that they would meet a similar fate, if they continued their human rights work.

Digna Ochoa was a leading human rights lawyer who had won international awards in recognition of her human rights work. She had worked with PRODH for many years on cases in which public officials, including members of the Offices of the Attorney General and the armed forces, had been implicated in serious human rights violations. She had campaigned to expose the perpetrators and force the authorities to bring them to justice.

The murder of Digna Ochoa has sent shock waves through Mexican society. It is more than 10 years since such a high-profile human rights activist has been murdered for their work. President Fox's administration, which came to power at the end of 2000 after over 70 years of one-party rule, has pledged to end impunity and radically improve Mexico's human rights situation. Digna Ochoa's murder and the death threat that goes with it demonstrate that the authorities have failed to deliver real improvements. Immediate measures are needed to ensure the safety of those who work to promote and protect human rights, including an end to impunity and recognition and support from all levels of government for the vital work of human rights defenders.

Digna Ochoa's murder was an open demonstration of the confidence of those responsible that they will never be brought to justice. This impunity is a permanent threat to those promoting and defending human rights, seeking to cow them into silence and terror. Digna Ochoa had suffered years of death threats, assault and intimidation, none of which were properly investigated effectively. Amnesty International believes that if the previous and current Mexican authorities had taken the appropriate action to ensure an exhaustive and independent investigation, her life might have been saved.

The Offices of the Attorney General are responsible for all judicial investigations in Mexico. Their investigation into the catalogue of threats and attacks on Digna Ochoa was unduly slow and cumbersome. The authorities did provide police protection for her and other PRODH members, but failed in their responsibility to bring those responsible to justice and to send a clear message that such attacks on those who defend human rights would not be tolerated.

Those who worked with Digna Ochoa are now in grave danger. At particular risk are human rights lawyers Pilar Noriega and Bárbara Zamora, who worked with her on very high-profile cases.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Digna Ochoa had been threatened and attacked many times since 1995. In August 1999, two men had forced her into a car in Mexico City and punched her in the stomach. Before they let her go, they warned her that she would be killed if she reported the attack. The next month, PRODH received three letters containing death threats. Attached to one of the threats was one of Digna Ochoa's business cards, apparently stolen when she was abducted.

On 28 October 1999, three men entered Digna Ochoa's house, blindfolded her and interrogated her for several hours about PRODH members and members of armed opposition groups operating in Guerrero and Chiapas. They tied Digna Ochoa to her bed and locked her in the room with a gas canister, with the valve open. She managed to escape after they left. That night the PRODH offices were broken into and searched. Another threat was left behind.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish, English or your own language:

- deploring the killing of human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa on 19 October in Mexico City;
- insisting that the authorities order an exhaustive and independent investigation into the killing, taking steps to ensure that vital evidence that could help identify those responsible is preserved;
- expressing concern for the safety of members of PRODH and human rights lawyers, Pilar Noriega and Bárbara Zamora, who worked with Digna Ochoa, and urging the authorities to give them appropriate protection, in accordance with their own wishes;
- pointing out that the international community will be closely monitoring the progress of the judicial investigation into the killing of Digna Ochoa, and asking them to ensure that it is conducted in accordance with international human rights standards, that those responsible are brought to justice, and that they take thorough and effective action to end attacks and harassment of human rights defenders in Mexico.
- reminding the authorities that the *UN Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Individuals, Groups and Institutions to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties* recognizes the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders and their right to carry out their activities without any restrictions or fear of reprisals.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

Lic. Vicente Fox Quesada

Presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos

Residencia Oficial de "Los Pinos"

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Salutation: Dear President/Señor Presidente

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Attorney General of the Republic

General Rafael Marcial Macedo de la Concha

Procurador General de la Republica

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Salutation: Dear Attorney General/ Estimado Procurador

Attorney General of the Federal District

Mtro. Bernardo Bátiz Vázquez

Procurador General del Distrito Federal

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Salutation: Dear Attorney General/ Estimado Procurador

Minister of the Interior

Lic. Santiago Creel

Secretario de Gobernación

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COPIES TO:diplomatic representatives of Mexico accredited to your country.

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PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 3 December 2001.