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Fear for safety

14 November 2000

MEXICO

Indigenous communities in the municipality of Chenalhó

Members of two displaced indigenous communities in the municipality of Chenalhó, Chiapas state, have come under threat from a so-called paramilitary group supported by the local political authorities. The communities fear for their lives.

According to reports, when federal security forces tried to search for weapons in the community of Los Chorros in Chenalhó on the night of 11-12 November, they came under fire from members of a paramilitary group known as the *Movimiento Indígena Revolucionario Antizapatista* (MIRA), Antizapatista Indigenous Revolutionary Movement. The MIRA, following a withdrawal by the security forces, then threatened to attack the nearby communities of X'oyep and Yibeljoj, where displaced indigenous people affected by political violence in Chiapas have taken refuge.

The MIRA is believed to have close links to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) which currently holds power in the municipality of Chenalhó.

The PRI recently lost the governorship of Chiapas for the first time in over 70 years. Governor-elect Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía, who headed a coalition opposed to the PRI, is due to take power on 9 December. Local *priístas* (PRI members or sympathizers) are reported to be supporting the MIRA so as to destabilise the transfer of power to the incoming governor and his administration.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In January 1994, the Mexican state of Chiapas came to the attention of the international community when the armed opposition group *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), Zapatista Army of National Liberation, launched its first attack by occupying the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and other urban centres. After a brief period of fighting with the security forces, the EZLN withdrew. Peace talks between the government and the EZLN got under way the following month. However, in September 1997 these were suspended, following EZLN allegations that the authorities had failed to implement previous agreements on indigenous rights.

An uneasy truce has been maintained between the parties since the EZLN withdrew its occupations. However, since the 1994 uprising countless armed conflicts have erupted between indigenous communities in Chiapas, some of them based on sympathies for or opposition to the EZLN. Others arose from disputed claims to land and other resources, or religious or party-political differences.

In December 1997 the international community was once again reminded of Chiapas, when 45 indigenous people were gunned down in the community of Acteal, also in Chenalhó municipality. Members of a so-called paramilitary group reported to have links with local PRI elements and the security forces were said to be responsible.

Many of the communities involved in these local conflicts, however, have been viewed as having links to or sympathies for either the EZLN or the municipal, state and federal authorities. The activities of at least a dozen of these groups and the deployment of thousands of soldiers and other federal troops have added to the climate of violence in many parts of Chiapas. As a result, thousands of indigenous men, women and children have fled their homelands and are now living in makeshift refugee camps.

Prior to and following his election last July, President-elect Vicente Fox of the opposition *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) repeatedly stated that ending the conflict with the EZLN will require a political solution, and that

withdrawing the army from the region would be an element towards a lasting peace in the region. The President-elect is due to assume power on 1 December, after more than 70 years of PRI rule.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern at reports that a paramilitary group said to have links with the Chenalhó municipal authorities in Chiapas have threatened to attack indigenous people from the communities of X'oyep and Yibeljoj in Chenalhó;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that the lives and safety of indigenous people in these communities are fully protected;
- calling on the authorities to conduct a prompt and effective investigation into the threats, make the findings public, and ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

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COPIES TO:

Centro de Derechos Humanos
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 San Cristóbal de las Casas, CP 29200, Chiapas,
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and to diplomatic representatives of Mexico accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 26 December 2000.