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Mexico: Gun attack increases concern for bishops' safety

Following yesterday's attack against a group of Indian worshippers headed by Bishops Samuel Ruiz and Raúl Vera, Amnesty International expressed increased concern for the two bishops' safety. Both men have received repeated threats and attacks as a result of their work for human rights and their role in the peace process in Chiapas state.

In a document issued today, the human rights organization asks its membership to send appeals to the Mexican authorities condemning the attack on the religious convoy headed by Bishops Ruiz and Vera on 5 November 1997. Amnesty International is seeking assurances that the injured will be given all necessary medical attention, and is calling for an immediate and thorough investigation into the attack, and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

"The Mexican authorities should implement urgent and appropriate measures to ensure the safety of Bishops Ruiz and Vera, and all the other victims of the attack, as well as that of any witnesses involved," Amnesty International said.

The attack occurred on the evening of 5 November in the town of Tila in Chiapas, as the bishops were leading 60 Indian worshippers back from a religious gathering. Hidden gunmen -- believed to be members of a paramilitary group -- ambushed the convoy and shot at them with machine guns. Three people are reported to have been injured.

According to Church officials in Mexico, the action was carried out by the paramilitary group known as *Paz y Justicia* (Peace and Justice), which had previously attempted to block Bishop Ruiz's visits to indigenous communities in Chiapas.

Amnesty International has issued this year more than 100 urgent calls to its membership in relation to human rights violations in Mexico, mainly on behalf of human rights defenders and concerning -- amongst other abuses -- cases of torture, extrajudicial executions, and "disappearance".

Background

Amnesty International has recorded a long-term pattern of threats, intimidation and violent repression against human rights workers active in promoting and protecting the rights of the poorest sectors of the population. The failure to bring to justice those responsible for human rights violations and the lack of effective action to stop them and to end such impunity has apparently helped to fuel an increasing number of threats and attacks against human rights defenders and peasant activists.

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