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Guatemala: Human Rights Activists under renewed attack in 2005

The New Year has arrived for human rights defenders with renewed attacks from clandestine groups and organised crime aiming to intimidate and sabotage human rights work. Attacks include death threats, attacks with firearms, false bomb alarms and "burglaries" in which mostly sensitive information was taken.

On 14 January, attackers drenched Makrina Gudiel's car with gasoline in an attempt to burn her alive. She managed to escape and is now in hiding.

Makrina Gudiel works in the local council of a small town in southern Guatemala. Her father Florentín was the Mayor of the same town. On 20 December 2004 he was cycling home when several men shot him in the back. Whilst lying on the ground the men shot him twice in the head and killed Florentín. Nothing was taken from him. Like Makrina he was an active campaigner against corruption.

On 11 January a phone call warning of a bomb threat was received at the Legal Action Centre for Human Rights (CALDH). The organisation had been receiving threats from members of the former Civil Patrols, paramilitary units that supported the army during the 36-year internal armed conflict and were responsible for many human rights violations. The ex-Civil Patrol groupings have publicly denounced CALDH and other organisations because of their opposition to government plans to pay compensation to ex-civil patrol members.

On 10 January, members of the Association of Internally Displaced People returned to their offices to find equipment and sensitive documents missing. The Association works with communities displaced during the internal armed conflict and for the fulfilment of government promises in relation to those communities.

On 9 January, the offices of HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio), an organisation that works to locate "disappeared" parents and prosecute those responsible, were raided. Three computers with information about the organisation's work, folders containing important documents, two digital cameras and photographic materials were taken during the raid. Valuable items such as scanners and printers were left behind.

On 7 January armed assailants chased Leonel García Acuña, a trade unionist working in a small town in the east of the country. They shot at Leonel and shouted amongst themselves to "kill the son of a bitch, don't let him live" but he managed to flee and reach a nearby village where he sought refuge. A week earlier Leonel had taken part in a meeting to help resolve an ongoing labour dispute, in which the employers had said they considered the trade union the "worst type of enemy".

The list goes on.

"The number of attacks against human rights defenders can be linked to the lack of political will to deal with the longstanding issue of lack of justice and clandestine groups in Guatemala." Amnesty International said.

"On repeated occasions the Berger Government has committed itself to ending impunity with little in the way of actual achievement" said Amnesty International, "The impunity with which clandestine groups operate and the damage they do to the rule of law in Guatemala is one of the biggest obstacles facing the current Government."

Amnesty International renews its call to the Guatemalan authorities to investigate all attacks against human rights defenders and bring to justice those responsible.

Public Document

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