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Guatemala: Government must demonstrate political will to improve human rights

The Guatemalan authorities must take concrete steps to end impunity and improve respect for human rights in the country, said Amnesty International today.

In a Memorandum sent to the Guatemalan government one year on since President Oscar Berger took office, Amnesty International (AI) presents a series of recommendations aimed at tackling human rights violations against women and human rights defenders. The Memorandum also includes recommendations to end abuses committed in the context of agrarian disputes and in regard to the potential impact of free trade policies on human rights.

During 2005, human rights defenders continued to be at risk of attack. AI received reports that between 1 January and 25 February 2005, 26 human rights defenders were victims of abuses including attacks and death threats. AI is also concerned at reports of killings by members of security forces in the context of demonstrations organized to protest against mining and the recently ratified free trade agreement.

In its Memorandum Amnesty International is calling on the Guatemalan government to investigate attacks and threats against human rights defenders, ensure that activists are able to carry out their work without fear of reprisals and to recognise the legitimacy of work to defend human rights.

The Memorandum also highlights the serious abuses faced by women in Guatemala. AI has received information that more than 520 women were violently killed during 2004. Many of the victim's bodies presented evidence of rape, torture, dismemberment and mutilation. According to official figures, the majority of these cases have not been investigated.

"These figures are likely to be only the tip of the iceberg. The full extent of violent killings of women in Guatemala is probably under-reported as there are serious deficiencies in the collection and management of data and virtually no coordination amongst government institutions dealing with violence against women."

"Amnesty International is calling on the Guatemalan government to fully resource and expedite investigations into the killings of women, as well as to modernise and reform forensic services, so that rape and other forms of sexual violence are thoroughly documented and investigations initiated."

The Memorandum also highlights human rights violations in the context of agrarian disputes, mostly between poor rural communities and wealthy farm and land owners.

According to UN figures, in the first six months of 2004, 31 evictions of rural communities were carried out, more than half of them violently. Action taken by members of the security forces often resulted in abuses such as beatings, the burning of houses and destruction of personal belongings.

"Evicting communities with legitimate grievances will only provoke more human rights violations. The Guatemalan authorities must concentrate on improving respect for labour rights, ensuring fair access to justice for all regardless of economic status, strengthening non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms, and securing the approval of a legally binding land register."

In its Memorandum, Amnesty International also expresses its concern at the human rights implications of the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement signed between Central American countries, including Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and the USA (CAFTA), particularly in relation to the right to health.

By prohibiting for five years the use of test data necessary to approve new medicines and by extending the patent period, AI fears the implementation of CAFTA may introduce restrictions to the production of generic medicines. Many Guatemalans may see their access to essential medicines effectively restricted. Amnesty International calls on the Government of Guatemala to ensure that the implementation of CAFTA does not adversely affect human rights, especially the right to health and access to essential medicines.

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