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## EL SALVADOR : RECENT INCIDENTS OF APPARENT HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

In recent weeks a wave of incidents reminiscent of the early 1980s, when security forces and the so-called "death squads" operated with impunity, have been reported from El Salvador. Available evidence in some of these recent abuses, in which trade union and campesino (peasant) leaders as well as human rights workers were the victims, clearly suggested security force involvement. In other instances, abuses were apparently perpetrated by groups acting in the guise of the so-called "death squads", prompting public expressions of fear by highly placed Salvadorian church officials that these incidents may signal the re-emergence of the "death squads".

These "death squads", which Amnesty International concluded had been customarily made up of regular police and military personnel, acting in plain clothes but under the orders of superior officers, had claimed responsibility for hundreds of killings per month in the early 1980s. Following signals from Washington and elsewhere that control of the death squads was a pre-condition for international acceptance and bilateral military assistance, their activities declined. However, perhaps a dozen bodies per month, showing death squad-style mutilations, are reportedly still found along El Salvador's roadsides, and according to international press reports, El Salvador's Minister of Defense acknowledged that "the death squads had yet to be completely dismantled". Auxiliary bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez has also been quoted as warning that "the President has an important concern: to stop the death squads from organizing again".

Amnesty International has noted and on several occasions welcomed public pronouncements by Salvadorian officials, including during the February-March 1987 session of the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights, that El Salvador is committed to the protection of human rights. In this connection, Amnesty International considers that allegations of official involvement in human rights violations must be thoroughly investigated without delay, and that any members of the security forces or others found to be responsible for abuses of fundamental human rights should be brought to justice. Prompt action by the authorities in cases such as cited below will, in Amnesty International's opinion, provide a positive demonstration of the government's commitment to prevent future human rights violations.

### 1. KILLING OF ANTONIO DE JESÚS HERNÁNDEZ MARTÍNEZ

Antonio de Jesús Hernández Martínez, Secretary General of the Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Agropecuarios (ANTA), National Association of Agricultural Workers, was reportedly seized by soldiers in mid-April 1987 as he made his way to a meeting of a peasant cooperative in the department of San Miguel. His body, showing apparent signs of torture, was reportedly



later found near the town of San Luis de la Reina, San Miguel. According to information received by Amnesty International, the Oficina de Tutela Legal del Arzobispado, the Legal Aid Office of the Archbishopric of San Salvador investigated these initial reports and concluded that soldiers from San Miguel had been responsible for the murder. According to international press reports, however, military spokesman Colonel Mauricio Hernández, who was asked about the case, "neither confirmed nor denied the army's involvement and said the military was not investigating it".

## 2. KILLING OF JOSÉ PILAR RIVERA ROMERO (AGED 24), CRISTINO MACHADO ARGUETA (AGED 26), SANTIAGO COREAS (AGED 23), CANDIDO RODRIGUEZ (AGED 19) AND ANDRÉS N. (SURNAME PRESENTLY UNKNOWN)

According to the Legal Aid Office of the Archbishopric of San Salvador, five workers who had been forced to work as couriers and porters for the armed opposition, were captured by soldiers of the Arce Battalion near the town of Nuevo Edén de San Juan, department of San Miguel on 21 May 1987 and summarily executed the following day. Their bodies were reportedly dumped in a well.

## 3. SHOOTING OF JULIO CÉSAR PORTILLO

Julio César Portillo, Executive Secretary of the Asociación Nacional de Educadores de El Salvador (ANDES), National Union of Salvadorian Teachers and its Secretary General from 1984 to 1986, was shot and seriously wounded on 31 May 1987 by Salvadorian troops who, according to eye-witness reports, singled him out as a target when they fired on people who had congregated outside La Esperanza men's prison to peacefully demonstrate their support for an amnesty for Salvadorian political prisoners. Portillo's condition is reported to be stable. He had allegedly received anonymous death threats by telephone. He is married with four children.

## 4. THREATS AND HARASSMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS WORKERS

On 28 May 1987 a bomb exploded at the offices of the Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos "Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero" (CO-MADRES), Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador "Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero", while most of its members were at the National Assembly to advocate amnesty for political prisoners. Two Co-Madres members, Angela Marroquin, aged 45, and Margarita López Marroquin, aged 15, were reportedly wounded by the blast.

Amnesty International also received reports of the attempted forcible entry at mid-day on 31 May 1987 of two truckloads of armed men in plain clothes, according to witnesses believed to have been members of the National Police, into the offices of the Comisión de Derechos Humanos, no-gubernamental (CDHES), non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, during which threats were reportedly made against human rights workers there.

On 6 June 1987 the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador was occupied by some 20 members of the recently formed Federation of Committees of Mothers



of the Disappeared, Political Prisoners and Assassinated, which groups various associations of relatives of political prisoners, including the Co-Madres. The Federation was protesting at the "disappearance" of Edwin Ernesto Vargas Aguilar, Luis Humberto Lemus Urrutia and Julio Ernesto Garcia Lucero, seized in Santa Ana on 1 May 1987 by armed men in plain clothes. The three men were on their way to attend the May-Day workers' march when, according to international press reports, they were forced into a white jeep with polarized windows by men believed to be army intelligence. Their families believe them to be held at the military base of the 2nd Infantry Brigade in Santa Ana, but military authorities have denied their detention. Amnesty International initiated an Urgent Action on behalf of the three men, asking for details of their whereabouts and that if detained, they be released unless charged with a recognizably criminal offence (UA 123/87 AMR 29/23/87).

The mothers of the three men, together with the other women in the cathedral, were reported to be on hunger strike at the time of writing. Several are said to have been beaten and others harrassed by security forces who have surrounded the cathedral.

## BACKGROUND

Trade unionists, church and human rights workers have been a target of human rights abuses for many years in El Salvador. In January 1986, Amnesty International called for inquiries into some 50 separate incidents involving the arrest, torture, "disappearance" or extrajudicial execution of unionists apparently because of their trade union activities.

Amnesty International also expressed its concern at a wave of arrests in 1986 of local human rights workers in an apparent effort to disrupt their human rights data collection and their humanitarian work with displaced persons in contested zones. A 1984 Amnesty International report entitled Extrajudicial Executions in El Salvador (AMR 29/14/84) included a section on "Human rights reporting and repression directed at staff of monitoring and reporting agencies" which catalogued the human rights violations directed at members of the Co-Madres, CDHES, Socorro Juridico Cristiano (Christian Legal Aid office) and other human rights groups, by the official security services and the so-called "death squads".

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