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Comisario  
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July 24, 2002

Dear Sirs:

The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights writes to express its serious concern about the raids by unknown forces on the premises of three human rights organizations and two social services groups on the night of July 21. We urge you to ensure that the government undertakes a thorough investigation of these raids and brings the perpetrators to justice. In addition we urge you to provide all appropriate and necessary security to the human rights defenders who work for these organizations.

Late on the night of July 21, the offices of five non-governmental organizations in Guatemala City were broken into. Three of these were human rights organizations: the *Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala*, the *Instancia Multi Institucional por la Paz y la Concordia*, and the *Centro Internacional para Investigaciones en Derechos Humanos*. In all offices, raiders ransacked papers and removed all computer and telephone equipment. The evidence at the scene after the raid reportedly included footprints typical of military boots throughout the various offices, raising suspicions of official involvement in the raids.

These midnight raids occur amidst growing insecurity for those who undertake the important work of uncovering the truth of past human rights violations, denouncing current rights violations, as well as building the institutions necessary to create a culture of respect for human rights and reconciliation in Guatemala. Much of this human rights work is being conducted in order to satisfy the right of the Guatemalan people to know about violations committed during the armed conflict, a right specifically mentioned in the 1996 Peace Accords. But such exposure of the truth about human rights violations is apparently perceived as threatening to well-armed clandestine forces with alleged ties to the Guatemalan military. It is of particular concern that leaflets in the name of supposedly independent clandestine groups threaten members of the clergy and the human rights community expressly in the name of defending the honor of Guatemala's armed forces. A recent and particularly disturbing such flyer in the name of "Dios, Patria y Libertad" characterizes the work of human rights defenders as "denigrating the Armed Institution," and "defaming democratic institutions such as the army..." (See attached leaflet, "Sacerdotes Catolicos Denigran a la Institución Armada.")

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It is a responsibility of the government to create an environment in which retaliation against human rights defenders is prevented and a culture of impunity not allowed to prevail. This requires that clandestine operations to intimidate or harm human rights defenders be halted, that any independent groups involved in such actions be dismantled, and that those involved in the abuse of human rights be brought promptly to justice.

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights, to which Guatemala is a party, states are obliged to respect and ensure respect for human rights. This obligation requires that human rights defenders be enabled to perform their important function in exposing violations of human rights. In addition, the Guatemalan government should act in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 1998, which calls upon states to ensure that “everybody has the right...to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms....” The government’s failure to address the ongoing intimidation of, and in some cases violence against human rights defenders constitutes a failure to meet these international standards.

In her statement issued on June 12, the U.N.’s Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders Hina Jilani, urged the Guatemalan government to attend to the ongoing threats, applauding the creation of the special prosecutor on attacks on human rights defenders and encouraging better coordination and political and financial support for this office. She also called for an immediate, thorough and independent investigation into the growing wave of threats against human rights defenders of the past several months. The Lawyers Committee echoes these concerns and equally implores the government to act at this critical time.

Furthermore, the raids on human rights offices occurred immediately prior to the *II Consulta Latinoamérica y del Caribe de Defensores de Derechos Humanos*, a conference of human rights defenders 25 nations to be held in Guatemala. The midnight raids on our colleagues’ offices seem intended to send a message of intimidation to human rights defenders. Nevertheless, the Lawyers Committee will continue to support human rights organizations working in Guatemala. We would appreciate any information that you can provide concerning steps taken by your government to end threats and attacks upon them, and to pursue the perpetrators.

Sincerely,

Neil Hicks  
Director, Human Rights Defenders Project