

TEXT OF THE LETTERS
TO PRESIDENT ZEDILLO AND MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR CARRASCO
Sent October 29, 1999

I am writing to you on behalf of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights to express our most serious concern regarding the attacks on the staff and installations of the Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez Human Rights Center (PRODH) which took place last night.

The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights is a non-governmental entity dedicated to protecting the rights of all persons as guaranteed in international human rights instruments. The organization places special emphasis on the protection of attorneys and other persons who suffer persecution as a result of the exercise of their profession or as a result of their legitimate activities undertaken in the defense of human rights. Our organization works closely with the PRODH on projects relating to the human rights situation in Mexico.

According to the information we have received, unidentified persons broke into the home of attorney Digna Ochoa y Placido, coordinator of the legal division of the PRODH, and subjected her to verbal aggressions, interrogation and intimidation during the night of October 28 and the morning of October 29. They also attempted to kill her.

Around 10:00 p.m. last night, an unknown individual grabbed Ms. Ochoa from behind, while she was on her patio, and covered her mouth. Ms. Ochoa lost consciousness. When she awoke, she was in her home, seated in a chair with her eyes blindfolded. She was subjected to a prolonged interrogation session conducted by at least two unidentified individuals, regarding the activities and personal information of each of the members of her organization. She was asked about alleged PRODH contacts in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Puebla and Hidalgo. She was also asked about alleged PRODH contacts with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR). Her assailants asked her about the type of arms that she and the other members of the PRODH knew how to operate. In addition, Ms. Ochoa was asked about two detained persons who have been presented as commanders of the Insurgent Revolutionary Army of the People (ERPI). The interrogators verbally insulted and threatened Ms. Ochoa.

The intruders then removed her blindfold and asked her to identify individuals in several photographs they showed her. She was able to observe that one of the aggressors entered her responses into a computer. Ms. Ochoa was then asked to sign papers; she refused. Ms. Ochoa's aggressors then blindfolded her again and continued the interrogation. They took pictures of her and went through her belongings.

This interrogation session lasted approximately nine hours until daybreak. Before leaving, Ms. Digna's aggressors tied her feet and hands to her bed. They left an open tank of natural gas at her side. Minutes after they left, she was able to untie herself. When she tried to phone for help, she realized that the line had been cut and disconnected.

The PRODH offices were broken into the same night. When the staff arrived at the office on the morning of the 29th of October, the main door was open and it was clear that the offices of the legal division of the organization had been searched. The window was open and the desks had been ransacked. A folder with the words "power of attorney for suicide" scribbled in red was left intentionally on one of the desks. The organization's closed-circuit videotaping system had been turned off.

These events follow upon a three-month period of harassment of the PRODH and especially Digna Ochoa. On August 9, 1999, Ms. Ochoa was forced into a white car by two unknown persons. She was hit in the stomach and threatened with death. On September 3, the PRODH received in the mail three envelopes containing anonymous death threats. The threats were directed at all of the members of the PRODH. However, the threats directed specifically at Digna Ochoa caused special concern. One of Digna Ochoa's business cards was included with the threat notes. Ms. Ochoa's business cards were among the items robbed on August 9.

On September 8, 1999, new death threats were deposited inside the PRODH offices. On the 14th of September, additional threat letters were found inside the main drawer of the receptionist's desk located in the lobby of the organization.

On October 5, Ms. Ochoa found her voter's registration card inside her home. This identification card had been stolen during the August 9th assault on Ms. Ochoa.

Subsequently, the PRODH received a new threat letter on October 13. This threat stated that there was a bomb in the office. It was found in the legal section of the organization.

The most recent incidents are of particular concern, because they clearly indicate that the lives and safety of the PRODH staff, particularly Digna Ochoa, are in real danger. They also tend to show that the acts of intimidation are political in nature and that they are all connected. It is also clear, from the pattern these events have followed, that the harassment of Digna Ochoa and the rest of the staff at the PRODH is likely to continue and to escalate.

This is not the first time that the PRODH has been subjected to harassment of this nature. The organization has received threats on other occasions. The threats against the organization first began in 1995 when PRODH attorneys, including Digna Ochoa, agreed to represent individuals accused of participation in the Zapatista insurgency movement in Chiapas in criminal proceedings. The PRODH had alleged, in those criminal cases, that the Judicial Police and prosecutorial authorities had been responsible for torturing their clients and denying them their due process rights.

As you know, the new United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders recognizes "the right and the responsibility of individuals, groups and associations to promote respect for, and foster knowledge of, human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international level." The Declaration also requires States to adopt measures as necessary to ensure that this right is guaranteed and to protect human rights defenders against threats and other types of violence. In addition, there exist other international principles which require governments to ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional functions without undue interference.¹

We are writing to respectfully request your intervention in this case to ensure that the Mexican State complies with its obligation to respect, protect and support the professional labor of the lawyers and human rights defenders at the PRODH. We specifically request that steps be taken to ensure that the appropriate authorities act, in consultation with the PRODH, to protect the PRODH staff and its work and to provide security for the organization's offices and documents. Finally, we ask that the authorities carry out an effective, rapid and impartial investigation leading to the prosecution and sanction of those responsible for the attacks on the PRODH.

¹ Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, Cuba, 27 August to 7 September 1990, Principles 16, 17.