



February 12, 2007

Ambassador James Derham  
American Embassy  
Avenida Reforma 7-01, Zona 10  
Ciudad de Guatemala 01010  
Guatemala

Dear Ambassador Derham,

### **Recent Serious Attacks against Human Rights Defenders**

Human Rights First writes to express its concern and to seek your intervention in a number of recent and disturbing attacks against prominent human rights defenders in Guatemala.

#### **1. Break-in and Robbery of MNDH offices**

As you are probably aware, over the weekend of February 3-4, a serious break in and robbery occurred at the offices of the *Unidad de Proteccion de Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos* (UPDDH), *Movimiento Nacional por los Derechos Humanos* (MNDH) and *Asociacion Comunicacion para el Arte y la Paz* (COMUNICARTE). The robbery was sophisticated and extensive. Every office had been forcibly broken into, and the vast majority of files and electronic equipment was taken. Almost all of the computers were stolen along with USB memory sticks video and filming equipment and other files. A number of the internal walls were broken down. The perpetrators left behind human feces on the terrace of the office, along with the gloves they used. They tied knots in computer cables to resemble a hanging noose and placed a copy of the MNDH's 2005 annual report on human rights defenders in the exit door. The title of the report is "The Terror Continues."

The computers and files taken contained extensive information on human rights violations including a catalogue of attacks against human rights defenders since 2002. The MNDH was about to release its annual report for 2006. The computers stolen also contained encrypted information on financial and operational details of the member organizations of MNDH.

Shortly afterwards members of staff discovered the break-in and were waiting for the police to arrive, a car passed the office and filmed staff and the building.

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We work very closely with UPDDH and MNDH and are shocked by these events. The circumstances of the break in are particularly grave because:

- It has crippled the capacity of these organizations to carry out their vital work. These organizations have been playing an important role in defending human rights in Guatemala by pushing for an end to impunity and demanding justice for the mass crimes that occurred during the armed conflict. Their ability to perform this work is now greatly reduced.
- It was clearly intended to intimidate the broader Guatemalan human rights community. MNDH is the national umbrella organization for most Guatemalan human rights organizations and the UPDDH investigates and documents attacks against human rights defenders. Therefore the effects of the break in and robbery extends to all human rights defenders in Guatemala.

## **2. Attacks and Death Threats against CALDH**

On the same weekend, February 5, Angelica Gonzalez, a lawyer with *Centro para la Accion Legal en Derechos Humanos* (CALDH) received a death threat. Angelica and CALDH provide legal support to the *Asociacion Justicia y Reconciliacion* (AJR) in the two national proceedings which seek justice on behalf of relatives killed in massacres during Guatemala's internal armed conflict. The note stated that Angelica and other members of CALDH's Justice and Reconciliation team such as Francisco Soto would be killed if they did not stop trying to protect victims. Angelica found the threat on the windscreen to her car while she was attending a meeting at the *Comision Presidencial de Derechos Humanos* (COPREDEH).

A few days earlier, on February 2, Jose Roberto Morales, also from CALDH was assaulted at gunpoint and kidnapped for less than one hour before being left on the outskirts of the city. None of his valuables were taken, including a laptop.

We also work very closely with Angelica and CALDH and are alarmed by the series of threats which appear aimed at deterring CALDH's work in seeking justice for past human rights violations. CALDH has suffered a number of threats and attacks since 2004.<sup>1</sup>

## **3. Links between the Attacks**

At a press conference on February 6 members of the affected organizations argued that the attacks against them and other recent attacks against the *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Accion Psicosocial* (ECAP) were linked. All of the organizations are seeking accountability for past crimes. In our opinion, the attacks were likely motivated by groups interested in preserving the impunity surrounding the cases that the human rights organizations were

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<sup>1</sup> See, Human Rights First, *Support New Initiatives for Justice in Guatemala*, (December 20, 2006) available at [http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd\\_guatemala/alert\\_122006\\_ecap.htm](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_guatemala/alert_122006_ecap.htm)

investigating. Some prominent members of Guatemala's human rights community have blamed illegal armed groups for the attacks.<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Action the United States Government Should Take**

These serious attacks against human rights defenders breach a number of the NGO Principles announced by Secretary Rice on December 14 2006. Secretary Rice stated that that United States government would "urge other governments to respect" these principles. In particular, principle 3 states that "NGOs should be permitted to carry out their peaceful work in a hospitable environment free from fear of harassment, reprisal, intimidation and discrimination."

As a way of responding to these serious attacks, Human Rights First calls upon you to:

1. Make public statements condemning: (1) the recent break in and robbery of the MNDH offices; (2) the kidnapping and death threats experienced by CALDH; and (3) the threats against ECAP.
2. Call for a prompt, impartial and thorough investigation into each of these cases. And closely monitor the progress of such investigations.
3. Make public statements recognizing the legitimacy and importance of the work performed by Guatemalan human rights defenders.
4. Call for the Guatemalan Congress to ratify the Agreement to establish the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). CICIG has the potential to investigate and promote the prosecution of groups responsible for some attacks against human rights defenders and thereby prevent future attacks by breaking the culture of impunity which encourages such attacks.

Human Rights First is confident that your intervention in these cases, as outlined above, would be extremely beneficial and would be much appreciated by Guatemalan human rights defenders.

Sincerely,



Neil Hicks  
Director, Human Rights Defenders Program

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<sup>2</sup> See Miguel Ángel Albizures, "Delincuencia Comun?" *El Periodico* (February 8 2007) available at: <http://www.elperiodico.com.gt/es/20070208/opinion/36522/>

**Cc**

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