

U.S. Human Rights Organizations Support the Formation of an International Commission to Investigate Illegal Armed Groups in Guatemala

As U.S.-based organizations concerned with the defense of human rights in Latin America and around the world, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International USA, express our strong support for the establishment of an international commission to investigate acts of intimidation against human rights activists in Guatemala and the existence of the illegal armed groups that appear to have been responsible for them. The proposal to form such a commission was announced by Sergio Morales, Guatemala's Ombudsman for Human Rights, on January 16. This proposal should be welcomed and encouraged by all those seeking to strengthen the respect for human rights and to consolidate the rule of law in Guatemala.

Over the past year, Guatemalan human rights defenders and jurists have suffered repeated acts of violence and intimidation. Unidentified forces have attacked and killed members of human rights organizations. They have also harassed and threatened justice officials working on important human rights cases in an apparent effort to prevent the prosecution of those responsible for past abuses. It is widely believed by local and international observers that these acts of intimidation are being carried out by illegal armed groups that are closely linked to current and former members of the country's security forces. By undermining the justice system and perpetuating a climate of impunity, the actions attributed to these groups have jeopardized the rule of law and the functioning of democracy in Guatemala. For a fair and effective system of justice to take root in Guatemala, the groups responsible for these acts of intimidation must be uncovered and dismantled.

In response to the recommendation of the Guatemalan government's own Human Rights Ombudsman, therefore, we call on the Government of Guatemala to formally request the involvement of the United Nations and the Organization of American States in forming an international commission to investigate the existence of illegal armed groups and their apparent role in attacks on the human rights community in Guatemala. We urge the government once again to ensure that Guatemalan human rights activists and jurists are protected from retaliation for their important work and to act fully in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders of 1998. Furthermore, we call on the international community to commit itself to the establishment of such an international commission and to carefully monitor the commission's investigations and recommendations. It is crucial that the Guatemalan government take decisive action against those who seek to prevent the consolidation of the rule of law and the establishment of a lasting peace.

Statement by:

The Washington Office on Latin America
The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights
Human Rights Watch
Amnesty International USA

