

UA 256/00

Fear for**GUATEMALA Celso Balán Argueta****His family and other members of CALDH and other human rights organisations.**

Celso Balán, a Guatemalan human rights worker in San Martín Jilotepeque, Chimaltenango, was detained, beaten, robbed, drugged and left unconscious by two people thought to be involved in paramilitary organisations. Sr Balán and his family were threatened against reporting the attack. Amnesty International is concerned for their safety.

Celso Balán is a representative for *Centro de Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos* (CALDH), the Centre for Legal Action in Human Rights. At the time of the attack he was working on a CALDH project to assist relatives exhume mass graves of villagers massacred by the Guatemalan army and the civil patrols under their command during the army's brutal counter-insurgency of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and to bring those responsible to justice.

On 1 August 2000, Sr Balán was making his way towards the courthouse in Chimaltenango to check on local efforts to exhume clandestine cemeteries when two people called him by name from their pick-up truck. Pretending to be journalists they showed him press cards and offered a lift to the courthouse. Once he was in the truck they forced him onto the floor of the vehicle with a gun at his head and drove away.

He was interrogated for several hours about a particular mass grave at Mixco Viejo, where the remains of those massacred by the army at the hamlet of Chipastor, San Martín Jilotepeque, Chimaltenango in 1982, had recently been exhumed and returned to their families for a traditional Mayan burial ceremony. Sr Balán was asked how it was possible to establish that it was army bullets which had killed the victims. He was then forced to accompany his attackers to the local CALDH office, where he was beaten with a gun-butt while the office was ransacked as the attackers searched for information.

Sr Balán was forced to drink a strong sedative which doctors say could have produced paralysis or even death had the dose been only slightly stronger. He was dumped at the local cemetery where he regained consciousness two days later. The experience has left him with neurological, physical, psychological and emotional problems for which he is receiving treatment.

Despite the threats, Sr Balán has now gone public about his ordeal and announced that he intends to continue his work with other communities in the area still seeking exhumations.

It is believed that those who attacked Sr Balán are linked to those responsible for the Chipastor massacre, and that the orders may have come from army personnel at the Chimaltenango military base.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), established under the 1996 Peace Accords which formally ended Guatemala's long-term civil conflict, reported in 1999 that it had verified over 600 large-scale massacres carried out by the Guatemalan military during the conflict. The large majority of victims were non-combatant indigenous peasants.

In May 2000, a new association of indigenous survivors of a number of massacres, the *Asociación Reconciliación para la Justicia*, The Reconciliation Association for Justice, filed a suit, assisted by CALDH, against officials of the administration of General Fernando Romeo Lucas García (7 July 1978-23 March 1982), for ten large-scale massacres carried out during that period against nine indigenous communities. The Association and CALDH are now collecting further evidence for a second suit regarding massacres under the subsequent administration of General Efraín Ríos Montt (March 1982-July 1983).

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in SPANISH or your own language:

- Urge the authorities to ensure the security of Celso Balán Argueta, his family and others in CALDH and other Guatemalan NGOs and government agencies involved in the effort to bring to justice those responsible for past human rights violations;
- Call for an immediate and thorough investigation into the attack against Sr Balán and for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- Urge the government to establish its own program of exhumations, as recommended by the CEH, as a necessary step in bringing those responsible to justice and building a strong and lasting peace as called for by peace accords.

APPEALS TO: (If a voice answers a fax no. ask for the fax tone "Pedir tono")

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and to diplomatic representatives of Guatemala accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 6 October 2000.