

Peace Brigades Internacional

in Mexico

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Accompaniment of Tital Radilla, vice-president of Afadem. Foto: PBI.

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PBI-Mexico's Work



NOTES ON THE CURRENT SITUATION

National

In its 2005 report, Human Rights Watch declared that the criminal justice system in Mexico usually does not impart justice to the victims of human rights abuses. One of the key weaknesses in the system is that the use of torture persists, and one factor perpetuating this practice is that some judges accept the use of evidence obtained under torture. Another major shortcoming in Mexico's criminal justice system is that it leaves the task of investigating and judging crimes carried out by the members of the armed forces against civilians in the hands of military authorities, who lack the necessary independence to carry out such investigations in a reliable and transparent manner.

Guerrero

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights declared admissible the denunciation of abuses to the human rights of Felipe Arreaga Sánchez, rural ecologist from the Sierra de Petatlán and Coyuca de Catalán, who has been imprisoned since November 2004. Arreaga Sánchez, along with 14 other defendants from this region also accused of homicide and unlawful association in the case, is accused of supposedly participating in the May 1998 murder of the son of Bernardino Bautista Valle, considered by the ecologists to be a forest exploiter. Amnesty International has adopted Felipe Arreaga as a prisoner of conscience.

Zeferino Torreblanca, candidate of the coalition headed by the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), won the elections for Governor of Guerrero, held this past February 6th, effectively putting an end to almost 80 years of governance by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The coalition "Guerrero Será Mejor" (PRD, Convergencia and PRS) gained 55% of the vote, ahead of the 42% gained by Héctor Astudillo, candidate of "Todos por Guerrero" (PRI, PT and PVM), and the 1.05% obtained by the National Action Party (PAN) candidate, Porfiria Sandoval.

In November 2004, coinciding with the presentation of the Memorial of the State Forum for the Typification of Forced Disappearance as a Crime, Santiago Corcuera Cabezut, expert from the United Nations' Working Group on Forced Disappearance, met with local legislators urging them to accelerate the process for the passage of a law to prevent and eradicate this crime in Guerrero. The campaign to promote this legal initiative was advanced by civilian human rights organisations in Guerrero beginning in December 2003.

In December 2004, the Agenda for the Integral Development and Autonomy of Indigenous Peoples of Guerrero was presented, in which local indigenous organisations outlined how they will work to meet their communities' needs and expressed their principal demands with respect to four central themes: indigenous government, community justice and normative systems, land and territory, and basic rights.

Sources used: Amnesty International, "Tlachinollan" Human Rights Centre de la Montaña, Centre of Human Rights 'Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez', Human Rights Watch, La Jornada and El Sur.

INTERVIEW WITH OTILIA EUGENIO MANUEL

ORGANISATION OF THE INDIGENOUS ME'PHAA PEOPLE (OPIM)

In February 2005, PBI began accompanying members of the Organisation of the Indigenous Me'Phaa People (known as Tlapanec although they call for the use of the name of their own language), and in particular one of the organisation's leaders and founders, Otilia Eugenio Manuel, originally from the community of Barranca de Guadalupe, in the municipality of Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero. For several years Otilia, along with her husband Cuauthémoc Ramírez and her sister Andrea, have been known for their commitment to the defence and promotion of the rights of the indigenous peoples of the region. The OPIM has disseminated denunciations of human rights violations that are the result of the large military presence in the communities, as well as of the cases of the two indigenous Me'Phaa women, Valentina

Rosendo Cantú and Inés Fernández Ortega, who were tortured and raped by members of the Mexican Army in 2002. Both of these cases are currently before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (CIDH). As a result of her work, Otilia has been the victim of harassment and death threats, including an anonymous death threat received in December, after participating in a forum convened by "Tlachinollan" Human Rights Centre in which she denounced the aforementioned cases. On January 14th, the CIDH recommended that the Mexican government take measures to ensure the life and well being of Otilia and her family.

Source: ¹ El Sur, February 1, 2005.

Where does your motivation to defend human rights come from?

When I was twelve or thirteen years old and I was in the second year of secondary school, some women from my community were raped. I never said that I wanted to study to be a professional and earn money. I said, "I want to study to defend my people", and that is what I achieved. My father told me, you are going to participate in meetings organised by the mayor and community authorities so that you can defend your rights and so that you know what you have to do when problems arise. Because this is what happens, he said, we don't know where we're going to end up, and we don't know if the authorities are going to be sympathetic to our cases.

What are the difficulties the communities of the municipality of Ayutla face?

We don't have much support. They take everything we have produced from us, and that is what we have for our families, what we use to buy salt and soap, and we don't have money... The women from the community cry, how sad it is that because of the army we can't work or leave the community, even our children stay at home instead of going to school.

How was the OPIM founded and what are its objectives?

We saw that it was necessary to form an organisation so that we could denounce what was happening. The OPIM was founded in 2002. We organised ourselves to bring our community out of the shade, so that we can get out of the situation we are currently in. For example, we are more interested in having a medical centre, in having medicine, a doctor and teachers... We want support for indigenous peoples, a project for indigenous women, justice for indigenous people. That's why we founded this organisation, which has 350 members.

What were the threats that you received and how did you react?

Someone came up to me in the street and told me that I should drop Valentina and Inés's case, that what they had

claimed were pure lies and that the accused want revenge. There have been people on the corner watching me. I have decided to denounce this too, so that indigenous people don't keep quiet, so that we can see that it is possible to do such a thing. The fact that I can do this without fear is an example to indigenous people, so that they can do the same. I also received an anonymous death threat. But we are not going to be stopped because they want to kill me. I have decided to do this for the organisations and for my family. I want justice to be done.

Why have you asked for accompaniment from PBI?

I want accompaniment from PBI because it helps me a lot to know that I am not alone, that there are people in other countries that are interested in my situation, in the problems that indigenous peoples face. With your accompaniment I feel safer. I can do more of the things I want to do. The truth is that I am worried something will happen to me or my family to a member of my organisation.

Interview transcribed by PBI.



A volunteer with Otilia Eugenio in Ayutla, Guerrero. Photo: PBI.

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCISCO CEREZO CONTRERAS CEREZO COMMITTEE

PBI has been accompanying Emiliana and Francisco Cerezo Contreras, members of the Cerezo Committee, since February 2002. In August 2001 their brothers Alejandro, Héctor and Antonio Cerezo Contreras were incarcerated, along with Pablo Alvarado Flores, all accused of being responsible for the explosion of several explosive devices in Mexico City banks. Emiliana and Francisco began to organise different activities to demand the release of their brothers, who are detained in the maximum-security prison La Palma in the State of Mexico and considered prisoners of conscience.

In 2004, members of the Cerezo Committee were targets of acts of harassment, pursuit and public defamation because of their legitimate work in the defence of human rights. They received threats following the death of university student and activist Noel Pavel González in April 2004, and in November 2004 Emiliana

Cerezo and fellow Cerezo Committee member Leonor Cano were followed by unknown persons. In January of this year, Héctor and Antonio were transferred to the prisons of Puente Grande, Jalisco, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, respectively, as a result of a massive security revision in response to the troubling security situation in La Palma.

On the first of March 2005, after taking part in this interview, Alejandro Cerezo was freed as a result of an appeal lodged in April 2004. However, Héctor, Antonio and Pablo Alvarado remain imprisoned, as the decision regarding the appeal did not result in their favour.

Sources: ¹ Urgent Action, LIMEDDH, Mexico City, April 30, 2004; ² Urgent Action, LIMEDDH, December 2, 2004; ³ La Jornada, January 17, 2005; ⁴ La Jornada, March 2, 2005.

What have been the Cerezo Committee's main activities during 2004?

Basically we have continued with information-spreading campaigns in the different spaces we work in, especially at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City; we have also visited several different states in Mexico to call upon people's solidarity with our cause, which resulted in the formation of new Cerezo Committees in Guadalajara, Xalapa, and Oaxaca. These add to the already-existing ones in Puebla and Montreal (Canada). Additionally, we've been adding to our list of contacts so we are able to reach more people when we send out our newsletters and related information about political prisoners and prisoners of conscience which other organisations send us, as well as information regarding human rights attorney Digna Ochoa y Plácido's death, and some other cases we are in solidarity with.

How have the recent transfers of Héctor and Antonio to other prisons affected the Committee's work?

We find that the visits use up our scarce economic resources, but what we think is of more concern is that they impede our ability to keep abreast of the human rights abuses committed against our brothers and Pablo Alvarado, as the distance and isolation to which they are subjected hinders our work. I'd like to emphasise that Antonio, who is detained in Matamoros, has the right to only two calls a week, whereas in La Palma, where Alejandro and Pablo are, the situation still hasn't normalized, but they have been permitted one phone call.

Have there been other forms of harassment affecting your work as human rights defenders?

The main attacks that we received - on three occasions in 2004 - were accusations reported by the media that our Committee is a 'façade for the Popular Revolutionary Army', and this year, following the illegal transfers, our work in the



Cerezo Committee march in Mexico City. Photo: PBI.

defence of human rights and our denunciation of human rights abuses in the federal prison La Palma were discredited as actually being in aid to imprisoned drug-traffickers in La Palma and having the goal of 'destabilising institutions'; all of which we denounced. This doesn't only affect our work but also puts the physical and psychological well being of our members at risk.

How has PBI's accompaniment affected the Committee's work?

We are convinced that PBI's accompaniment helps us to be more visible and with this comes protection from attacks transmitted by the media discrediting the legitimacy of our Committee. It allows each of us to move about more freely and to be present in the different spaces where we carry out our work. We believe that with PBI's accompaniment, we run less of a risk.

Interview transcribed by PBI.

PBI MEXICO'S WORK SINCE NOVEMBER 2004

Accompaniment

We accompanied, in their various activities:

- Emiliana and Francisco Cerezo Contreras, members of the Cerezo Committee, in the Federal District and in their trips to visit their brothers in prison.
- The Organisation of the Indigenous People Me'Phaa (OPIM) in Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero
- Tlachinollan Human Rights Centre de la Montaña, to members of the office in Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero.
- Tita Radilla Martínez, vice-president of AFADEM (Association of Relatives of the Detained, Disappeared and Victims of Human Rights Abuses in Mexico) in Atoyac de Álvarez, Guerrero.
- José María Morelos y Pavón Regional Human Rights Centre in Chilapa de Álvarez, Guerrero.
- Residents of the Settlement Leonardo Rodríguez Alcaine (LRA) in Acapulco, Guerrero
- Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre, to members of the office in Chilpancingo, Guerrero.

Interviews with Diplomatic Corps

We had meetings with the political advisors and Human Rights Officers of the German, French, Canadian and North American Embassies.

Interviews with Mexican authorities

At the federal level we met with members of the Department of Internal Affairs, the Department of External Affairs. The Department of Public Security, the Attorney General's Office of the Republic, the Senate of the Republic, the Congressional Lower House and the National Human Rights Commission.

In Guerrero, we met with members of the State Government, the State Attorney General's Office and the Ministerial Police, and the Human Rights Commission of Guerrero.

We also met with municipal authorities and heads of the Ministerial Police Force in the municipalities of Atoyac de Álvarez, Ayutla de los Libres and Chilapa de Álvarez.

Interviews with non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

In Mexico's Federal District, we met with members of the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre, the National Centre for Social Communication (CENCOS); the Collective Against Torture and Impunity (CCTI); the Council for the Law and Human Rights; the Mexican League for Human Rights Protection (LIMEDDH); the National Movement Against Neoliberalism; the National Civil Organizations Network "Todos los Derechos para Todos"; the Peace and Justice Religious Service (SERPAJ).

In Guerrero we met with members of the Collective for Female Rural Workers (COMUCAM); Human Rights Committee 'Sembrador de la Esperanza'; the Southern Sierra Rural Workers Organisation (OCSS); the Organisation of Women Ecologists of the Sierra of Petatlán; the Guerrero Human Rights Network.

In Oaxaca we met with members of the Flor y Canto Human Rights Centre; Tepeyac Human Rights Centre of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; the Bartolomé Carrasco Regional Human Rights Centre " (COMADH); the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca "Ricardo Flores y Magón" (CIPO-RFM); EDUCA (Services for an Alternative Education); LIMEDDH Oaxaca; the Organisation of Indigenous Zapotec Peoples (OPIZ); the Protection of Young People; the Oaxaca Human Rights Network (RODH); Indigenous Community Union of the Isthmus (UCIZONI); Unihidalguense Civil Council ; the Diocesan Commission for Peace and Justice.

Security Workshops

Security workshops were given to human rights defenders of organisations working in the state of Oaxaca.

Peace Brigades International

in Mexico



PBI is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that, upon request, maintains teams of international accompaniers in areas of conflict. PBI seeks to protect the political space of individuals and organisations who promote human rights and who in turn suffer repression as a consequence of their work. International accompaniment is a conflict transformation tool through which third parties contribute to create the conditions necessary to resolve a conflict. At no time does PBI attempt to replace Mexican initiatives promoting human rights, but rather limits itself to supporting said initiatives with the presence of international accompaniers. To achieve this goal, PBI teams work in-country accompanying threatened individuals or organisations, periodically visiting conflict zones, dialoguing with both civil and military authorities and distributing information about the evolution of the conflict in an effort to raise international awareness.

PBI Mexico's Project Information Bulletin is a tri-annual publication written and produced by the team in Mexico. PBI Mexico maintains the highest possible level of objectivity thanks to the use of a wide variety of public sources (newspapers, magazines, public reports from civil organisations, etc.) and the citation of all sources used in its articles. The bulletin is distributed both within Mexico and internationally. If you would like to receive the PBI Mexico Project Information Bulletin, please contact the Project Office in Brussels or the PBI Team in Mexico.

<p>PBI Mexico's International Office Rue Saint-Christophe 38, 1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel: +34 93 451 17 40 E-mail: pbimexico@peacebrigades.org</p>	<p>PBI-Mexico Team Calle Lerdo 9, Chilpancingo, 39022, Guerrero, México Tel: + 52 747 47 11 962 E-mail: pbigro@prodigy.net.mx</p>
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