



PRESS RELEASE

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Mexico: ARTICLE 19 condemns the murder of two young community broadcasters in Oaxaca

Felicitas Martínez Sánchez, 21, and Teresa Bautista Merino, 24, broadcasters from the community radio station “*The voice that breaks the silence*” in the town of San Juan Copala, were ambushed and killed while travelling to Joya del Mamey a Putla de Guerrero in the state of Oaxaca, on 7th April. In the attack four other people were wounded, including the Chief of the Civil Registry Office and a prominent activist from UBISORT (Unit of Social Welfare for the Triqui Region) Faustino Vásquez Martínez, his wife Cristina Flores (22) and their sons, Agustín Gustavo (3) and Jael Vázquez Flores (2).

The ambush and murders add to the atmosphere of insecurity and political confrontation that has been typical of this region, since the beginning of 2007. This has been attributed in part to the declaration in January 2007 by the Triqui people of the creation of the autonomous municipality of San Juan Copala, 350 km from the state capital.

ARTICLE 19 condemns the attack and murders and calls for an immediate and thorough investigation into the killings. “*Yet again, Mexican journalists are paying the heaviest price for doing their work. Yet again, the most vulnerable amongst them, community broadcasters, are targeted*” said Dr. Agnes Callamard, ARTICLE 19’s Executive Director.

“The young voices that wanted to break the silence have been smothered. And all we are left with for now are the tears and anguish of their family, friends, colleagues and community, and cries for justice left unanswered. It is absolutely imperative that all avenues be explored to shed light on this ambush and killings” adds Dr. Callamard.

According to the Centro de Apoyo Comunitario Trabajando Unidos, (CACTUS), the ambush took place between 1:00 and 2:00 pm on 7th April. The police found more than twenty shells from an AK-47 at the scene.

The community radio station “*The voice that breaks the silence*” has been broadcasting since January 2007. Its broadcasters and audience is composed of a majority of young people and adolescents of the Triqui people.

Omar Esparza, CACTUS coordinator for the area, pointed out that “*the group had gone out to report on and interview people. They were indigenous reporters that had this task entrusted to them by the community authorities.*” Esparza concluded that “*it’s a*

pity that nobody would be reporting and denouncing the critical situation that has been characterizing the region for the last five months.”

ARTICLE 19 expresses its solidarity with the families and colleagues of Felicitas Martínez Sánchez and Teresa Bautista Merino.

Background:

The local government has alleged that a land dispute is behind the ambush and killing. However, ARTICLE 19's sources have reported an intimidation campaign against the Triqui people, particularly since the declaration of autonomy in January 2007, and they have pointed the finger at state and local authorities. At the time of the ambush, the two young broadcasters were in charge of the discussions regarding Community Broadcasting in the Regional Summit for the Defence of Rights of the People of Oaxaca – a gathering of indigenous organisations in the City of Oaxaca on the 8th and 9th.

The declaration of autonomy was made in response to, and as a peaceful protest against, the Indigenous People Legislation that was supposed to embrace the spirit of the San Andres Accords signed by EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) and President Zedillo back in 1995. Although the initial call to declare autonomous territories came from the EZLN, many of these territories do not sympathise with the armed movement. However, the Triqui movement has been identified as militant by the National Indigenous Congress and this identification with the Zapatista guerrillas has placed the Triqui people in a very vulnerable position.

Such declarations challenge the Mexican legal system, since autonomous entities are not contemplated by the constitution. The federal and local governments have reacted to declarations of autonomy by arming paramilitary groups, often from within the community, opening the way to intra-community violence. In this specific case, the autonomous municipality of San Juan Comalapa occupies the territory of 3 official municipalities, strongly influenced by the "caciques", alleged to be against indigenous people.

The killing of the two community broadcasters is the first incident of such magnitude reported since the massacre of Acteal on 22nd December 1997 when 45 people attending a prayer meeting of Roman Catholic indigenous townspeople, including a number of children and pregnant women, were killed by unknown paramilitary forces in the small village of Acteal in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Many of the dead belonged to the pacifist group las abejas ("The Bees").

NOTES TO EDITORS

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.