



WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

Celebrating 30 years of promoting democracy, human rights and social justice in Latin America.

The Honorable Elías Antonio Saca González
President of El Salvador
Casa Presidencial
Avda. Dr. Manuel Enrique Araujo 5500
San Salvador, El Salvador

July 6, 2007

Dear President Saca:

On behalf of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), I would like to express my grave concern about the detentions that took place in and around the municipality of Suchitoto on July 2nd and about the charges that are being leveled against those detained.

I understand that on July 2, four individuals were detained while on their way to Suchitoto to attend a protest against the decentralization policy that you were announcing there that morning. The individuals were Marta Lorena Araujo, the President of the CRIPDES National Leadership Council; Rosa Valle Centeno, the Vice-President of the CRIPDES National Leadership Council; María Haydee Chicas, a CRIPDES journalist and photographer; and Manuel Antonio Rodriguez, the driver of the CRIPDES van. According to reports, these four individuals were arrested several kilometers outside the location of the protest, and prior to their arrival at the protest. They did not at any time participate in protest activities that occurred in the town on July 2.

It is my understanding that following the arrests of these four individuals, a group of demonstrators gathered at the local police barracks to demand their release, and that a confrontation ensued between the demonstrators and the anti-riot unit (*Unidad para el Mantenimiento del Orden, UMO*) of the National Civilian Police. At least ten demonstrators were arrested in that incident; at least one police officer was injured, as were a number of demonstrators.

I am particularly concerned about the arrests of the four individuals from CRIPDES, who were detained before they arrived at the demonstration, and distressed to hear that they are being charged with “Creating Public Disorder, Destruction of Property and Acts of Terrorism” under El Salvador’s Anti-Terrorist Law

It is difficult to see any legal justification for the detention of these four individuals, who never arrived at the protest; there is no apparent evidence of any criminal activity. These four individuals did not participate in acts of public disorder, destruction of property or in any alleged acts of terrorism; it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that their arrests were



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intended to prevent them from participating in the demonstration, and were politically motivated.

The charges against all those arrested in Suchitoto under the Anti-Terrorism law are troubling as well. I did not of course observe the events in Suchitoto, and cannot say whether those individuals who were arrested provoked the anti-riot police or engaged in assault or other illegal activities. If so, appropriate legal action may be warranted.

But there is an important distinction between acts of protest, even those that run afoul of the law, and “terrorist” acts. Respect for democracy and freedom of speech demand that this distinction be observed.

Just this week, in throwing out charges under the Anti-Terrorism law against Vicente Ramírez, a leader of the union of street vendors, Salvadoran Judge Rigoberto Chicas ruled that acts of terrorism are defined as being carried out with the intent to cause terror and that such a definition does not apply to acts of protest. He also stated that the term “terrorism” should not be applied in an irresponsible way.

The charges under the Anti-terrorism law, and the rhetoric that has ensued do not contribute to an atmosphere conducive to political dialogue; instead they help create a climate of fear, intimidation, and political confrontation.

We hope your government and the Fiscal General will drop all charges against Marta Lorena Araujo, Rosa Valle Centeno, María Haydee Chicas and Manuel Antonio Rodríguez., as well as withdraw the anti-terrorism charges in all cases pertaining to the events of July 2.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Geoff Thale". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Geoff Thale
Director of Programs

CC: Felix Garrid Safie, Attorney General
Ambassador Rene Antonio León Rodríguez
Beatrice Alamanni de Carrillo, Ombudsman for the Defense of Human Rights