

**For Immediate Use:
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Human Rights Organizations Call on the U.S. Government to Withhold Renewing Military Aid to Guatemala Given Deteriorating Human Rights Situation

Washington, DC— In recent months, the U.S. government has stated its intention to improve military relations and renew military assistance to Guatemala. Guatemalan authorities are hoping Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld will make the offer official during his visit to Guatemala on Thursday, March 24. As U.S. organizations concerned with the defense of human rights in Latin America, we call on the U.S. government to withhold restoring military assistance to Guatemala until the Guatemalan government takes concrete steps to address the continued human rights violations in the country.

Over the last several years, Guatemalan human rights defenders have been subject to a renewed wave of attacks by clandestine groups or illegal armed groups that were to have been dismantled following the signing of the historic 1996 Peace Accords. These amorphous networks are said to have ties to the military intelligence apparatus, as well as drug trafficking and organized crime. In 2004, the National Human Rights Movement reported 122 attacks, and so far this year at least 26 human rights defenders have been threatened or attacked. In its final report, the UN Verification Mission to Guatemala (MINUGUA) noted that “attempts to investigate and prosecute security forces members for atrocities committed during the conflict have been generally unsuccessful; those who try have been subject to threats, violence and years of judicial obstruction.”

The activities of the clandestine groups have undermined the justice system and perpetuated a climate of impunity and citizen insecurity, which in turn has created fertile ground for the further spread of corruption, drug trafficking and organized crime. The clandestine groups have become a serious obstacle to the peace process, rule of law, democracy, and the respect for human rights and must be stopped.

Despite its commitment to ending impunity and combating the clandestine groups, the Berger Administration has demonstrated a lack of political will and ability to make progress in establishing an effective mechanism to investigate and dismantle the clandestine groups, an issue the United States government has defined as a top priority in its relations with Guatemala. A landmark agreement signed in January 2004 to establish a UN-led Commission for the Investigation of Illegal Armed Groups and Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CICIACS) was struck down following a Constitutional Court’s advisory opinion against key aspects of the agreement. The agreement was strongly supported by the United States. New proposals made in November 2004 to investigate the clandestine groups have reportedly not moved forward.

As the United States government considers whether or not to renew military assistance programs to Guatemala, it should take a hard look at the overall human rights situation in the country and at the lack of progress by the Guatemalan authorities in the promotion and defense of human rights, consolidation of the rule of law, and in limiting the role of the military to external security. The military continues to participate in joint police-military law enforcement operations, which are in direct violation of the Peace Accords. Instead of encouraging military participation in joint patrols, civilian security agencies should be strengthened.

Guatemala has experienced remarkable change since the signing of the Peace Accords. In the areas of human rights, democracy and citizen security, however, tremendous challenges remain. Corruption, inequality, crime and weak rule of law are widespread. If left unattended, these problems could lead to growing social conflicts and the corrosion of democratic governance.

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)
Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights
Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala
Guatemala Human Rights Commission