

CENTER FOR
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PRESS RELEASE

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THE CENTER FOR GENDER & REFUGEE STUDIES DENOUNCES THE MURDER OF PEPE MÉNDEZ, CALLS FOR AN END TO IMPUNITY IN GUATEMALA

**Advocates demand a full investigation into the assassination of Pepe Méndez, son of
internationally recognized human rights defender, Amílcar Méndez**

SAN FRANCISCO...On Friday, August 17, 2007, 28 year-old José Emanuel "Pepe" Méndez Dardón was assassinated on his way home from work in Guatemala City. Pepe, the married father of seven year-old twins, was the son of Amílcar Méndez, who has been internationally recognized for his human rights work.

The day before Pepe Méndez was assassinated, he and his father submitted an urgent communiqué to the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Human Rights Center at the request of Dr. Rafael Espada, vice presidential candidate of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) party, who feared that his life was at risk. There has been a rising tide of violence – against candidates and human rights activists – in the run-up to Guatemala's September 9 elections.

Center for Gender & Refugee Studies Director Karen Musalo, a human rights lawyer and long-time friend of the Méndez family, decried the cold-blooded murder of Pepe Méndez. "Far too many heroic defenders of human rights in Guatemala have become victims of political violence, and those accountable have gone free. We must demand that the government of Guatemala put an end to this impunity."

(more)

In Guatemala, impunity is widespread and most violent crimes are never investigated or prosecuted. Many of those responsible for committing some of the worst human rights violations during Guatemala's 36-year civil conflict -- in which more than 200,000 were killed, and tens of thousands disappeared -- have yet to be brought to justice, and there has been a proliferation of clandestine armed groups, many of which include former human rights violators. Recently, the Guatemalan Congress voted to approve an international commission that would investigate and assist in prosecuting these clandestine groups that are frequently responsible for attacks against human rights activists.

In 1988, Amílcar Méndez founded CERJ (The Council of Ethnic Communities Runujel Junam), which promotes and defends the rights of Guatemala's indigenous communities, and he served as a member of the Guatemalan Congress from 1996 to 2000. In recognition of his courage and dedication to human rights, Amílcar Méndez received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award and the Mitterand Human Rights Award, and CERJ was recognized with the Carter-Menil Award for Human Rights.

Amílcar Méndez has survived numerous death threats and the bombing of his home, spending several periods of exile in the U.S. Pepe Méndez had also received a number of death threats, including some within the last month, which were reported to Guatemala's Human Rights Prosecutor.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had ordered the Guatemalan government to undertake measures to protect Amílcar Méndez, after determining that he faced "grave and imminent risk of harm." In response to this order, the government provided him with physical accompaniment. However, similar protection was not extended to other members of his immediate family, including Pepe.

While critical facts surrounding Pepe Méndez's assassination are still emerging, a large network of concerned individuals and organizations – both in the U.S. and internationally – are demanding a full investigation into the murder. A targeted advocacy campaign, JUSTICE FOR PEPE ~ JUSTICE FOR GUATEMALA, will soon be launched.

The Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law seeks to advance human rights protections for refugee women and girls. In 2005 CGRS launched the *U.S.-Guatemala Partnership to End Violence Against Women*, a campaign focused on the issue of impunity and Guatemala's epidemic of gender-motivated killings or "femicides" that have claimed the lives of over 3,000 women and girls since 2000.

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