

GUATEMALA

Two sentenced for murder of peasant rights activist Israel Carías

IRTF's Rapid Response Network has faxed dozens of letters on behalf of peasant rights activists, including members of the Guatemalan peasant farmers' association, Comité de Unidad Campesina, (CUC). CUC members and leaders have been intimidated or killed in several departments of Guatemala. Most of these abuses have resulted from CUC's advocacy for peasant land rights. Violence against CUC members was particularly intense in 2007.

CUC member **Israel Carías Ortiz** and his two children, aged nine and ten, were murdered on February 6, 2007 in Zacapa Department. Carías, president of the regional peasant farmers' association (ACUS) was shot at point-blank range while walking from his community, Los Achiotos, to the city of Zacapa with his sons. Backed by more than 80 families, Carías, who had been receiving threats since at least 2004, had led the campaign to recuperate community lands—legally recognized as such in 1951—from *finqueros* (large land owners) illegally usurping the territory.

Just three days later in neighboring Chiquimula Department, armed men tried to hunt down community leader **Leonard Ramírez**, who was working on behalf of peasants threatened with eviction from the San José las Lagrimas farm. On February 13; **Vicente Ramírez López**, was killed when he and three others were attacked on the Las Lagrimas farm by four armed men. On February 24, one of Leonardo Ramírez's relatives was told by someone linked to the army that anyone who killed Leonardo Ramírez would receive 500 quetzales for Ramírez's head. Then on April 18, another CUC leader, regional coordinator Abelardo Roldan, was victim of an attempted abduction by 20 armed men; fortunately, he escaped.

Precedent-setting court victory

June 22, 2009 became an historic day for the family of Israel Carías Ortiz, and for the people of Guatemala. The Sentencing Tribunal in Zacapa Department found two men guilty of the 2007 murder of Ortiz and his two sons Ledwin Anilson (age 9) and Ronald Aroldo (age 11).

The precedent-setting sentence recognizes Carías was killed because of his leadership in the struggle to reassert legal rights to community land, and mandates an investigation into the planning or "intellectual authorship" of the murder: the *finqueros* presumably responsible for contracting the assassins to protect their interests.

For the first time, a Guatemalan court established that guilt in attacks against human rights defenders goes beyond the actual perpetrators. Those responsible for



Carías' widow marches with a poster that reads, "Israel, they took your life too quickly, but your campaign continues."

orchestrating the attacks must be identified and held accountable for conceiving and financing the crime.

A speech filmed before his death, which had been presented as evidence, reminded those in the packed courtroom of Carías' steadfast commitment. "Despite the persecution, I will not allow a backward step," declared Carías in the film footage.

The panel of judges affirmed that Carías was killed for defending his community's rights.

On June 22 the Tribunal delivered its verdict: the two accused, Jacobo Salguero and Manfredo Ramirez, respectively perpetrated and were accomplice to the premeditated assassination of Israel Carías at the instruction and in possible employment of the *finqueros*. Salguero was previously acquitted of a murder in 2004 because, as he described, "No one was willing to testify against him." Ramirez is his brother-in-law, as well as the nephew of Carías. Both men lived in Los Achiotes until their arrest.

Although there has not yet been any movement towards prosecuting the *finqueros* in this case, the sentence sends a clear message to those historically protected by nationwide impunity. This aspect of the sentence is perhaps more important for its symbolism than its possibility for prosecution in the case of Carías' murder.

Today, the community is still waiting for the final document to arrive settling the land issue, and ACUS and the Association for Community Development of Los Achiotes (ACIDEA) leaders report feeling like targets for their organizing.

Currently, the president of ACIDEA is Carías' twenty-one-year-old niece who knows intimately the responsibility and risk of the position. Inspired by her uncle, she refuses to be silenced by fear. "[My uncle] knew that sooner or later he would be killed for his organizing. But we all die. It is a question of dying on your knees or living standing up. We choose with our eyes open."

ACIDEA hopes to construct a memorial in Los Achiotes to ensure that Carías—and his sacrifice for the common good—is not forgotten.

Community remember Israel Carías:

"He was kind to everyone."

"Even as a boy, he knew he would lead his community."

"He was a man of vision."

"He was a great leader. He literally gave his life for the community."

Source for news of the verdict: The Dominion: News from the Grassroots, as posted to Upside Down World
<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/content/view/2105/1/>