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## **Guatemala: Reports On Investigation & Prosecution Of Mirna Mack Murder Case**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

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In a report released March 4, the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR) criticized the Guatemalan government's failure to fully investigate and prosecute persons responsible for the 1990 murder of anthropologist Mirna Mack Chang. The report said numerous delays, irregularities, and cover-ups have obstructed investigation of the case. The National Police provided the first judge assigned to investigate the case with an edited and altered version of their findings. The Committee said the original report stated unequivocally that Mack was murdered in retaliation for her publications on refugees and displaced persons, and named Noel de Jesus Beteta Alvarez as the prime suspect. The altered version submitted to the court claimed that Mack was killed during a robbery attempt, and made no mention of Beteta. According to the Committee, police officers destroyed or lost most of the useful evidence found at the crime scene, suggesting a "deliberate effort to prevent identification of the murderers." In addition, between July 1991 and January 1992, the Defense Ministry ignored repeated requests from the court for information on Beteta. The Ministry later provided "incomplete and contradictory information." Next, the Lawyers Committee pointed out that Jose Merida Escobar, police detective assigned to the case, was assassinated outside the National Police headquarters in 1991. Merida's murder, said the report, served as a "clear signal" to anyone else seeking justice in the case. The report noted that the case has been handled by 11 different judges in nine courts over the last 17 months. LCHR director Michael Posner said that "Mack's murder is another in a long-term pattern of political killings in Guatemala...Since the early 1950s, the Guatemalan armed forces have enjoyed almost total impunity in their campaign against persons described as 'subversives'." The report stated that Mack's research on the causes and consequences of displacement of rural highlands residents "broke the code of silence that reigned in Guatemala, making her a target of the military." According to Posner, "Myrna Mack was among those who spoke out, and she paid for her actions with her life." (Basic data from Inter Press Service, 03/04/92)

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