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MEDIA ADVISORY

February 7, 2008

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El Salvador's Government Proceeds with Prosecution of Anti-Water Privatization Activists under New Anti-Terrorism Law

Salvadoran Social Movements and International Community Express Mounting Concern Over the Erosion of Democratic Freedoms

On Friday, February 8th, 2008 the Salvadoran government is scheduled to present their prosecution against thirteen organizers and community members at a special tribunal in San Salvador. The thirteen were arrested on July 2, 2007, while proceeding to an anti-water privatization forum in the town of Suchitoto. Police attacked people with rubber bullets and tear gas, and demonstrations ensued. Organizers of the forum were arrested in their truck on the way into Suchitoto.

The charges include Terrorism and Organized Crime. Both laws are new since 2006, and are controversial, criticized for their vagueness and potential to be applied to the activities of El Salvador's strong social movement as a means of criminalizing peaceful dissent. The Organized Crime law sets proceedings in a Special Tribunal, which is not bound by the same requirements of the regular courts, including evidentiary hearing.

Human rights groups, in and out of the country, including the government's Ombudsman for Human Rights, have condemned the conduct and excessive use of force by police and the military on July 2nd. They question the application of the Terrorism charges to the thirteen, and question the constitutionality of the law, an issue the Supreme Court began looking into at the end of January. Organizations also warn against the closing of democratic space afforded by the 1992 Peace Accords, which ended El Salvador's brutal 12 year civil war. Over 41 US Congressional Representatives have also voiced serious concerns to this effect.

After the prosecution presents its charges to the special tribunal on Friday, the defense will have until February 13th to present its arguments. Members of hundreds of organized rural communities, campesino, and labor groups, will march from Suchitoto to San Salvador from February 11th to 13th.

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