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Arizona activist faces death threat

Demetria Martinez | Jul. 15, 2009 NCR Today

Isabel Garcia, a Tucson, Ariz., attorney whose work on behalf of immigrants has earned her international acclaim, has received a death threat from an individual claiming to offer a half million dollars to anyone who might assassinate her.

Written in broken Spanish, the threat arrived by e-mail at the offices of Coalición de Derechos Humanos, or the Human Rights Coalition, in June. Garcia is the co-chair of the organization, which monitors the growing militarization of the border, tracks border patrol abuses, and promotes community education about rights when encountering law enforcement officials.

Written in broken Spanish, the unsigned e-mail warns Garcia, "We know where you live and we watch and follow you and your compatriots."

Death threats are nothing new to Garcia, but this one is particularly chilling: It arrived the same month that a break-away faction of the Minutemen, an armed, anti-immigrant vigilante group, murdered a Mexican-American father and his daughter in their home in the border town of Arivaca, Ariz. It also arrived shortly after the June 10 murder of a guard at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington by a rifle-wielding white supremacist ? a reminder of the growing numbers of hate crimes taking place throughout the United States.

I had the privilege of working with Garcia as a member of Derechos Humanos in the 1990s when I lived in Tucson. Her passion for justice has made her a mentor to many. As one of the founders of the 15-year-old Derechos Humanos, she has helped build a formidable organization, privy to information about border militarization that the government has tried to keep from the public.

Her work has angered both anti-immigrant groups in the United States and the Mexican government.

In 2006, the Mexican government awarded Garcia its National Human Rights Award for her work as the Pima County Legal Defender; this was the first time the award went to a person not born in Mexico. Garcia requested five minutes to speak at the ceremony in Mexico: She was hoping to talk about the deaths of immigrants crossing the border into Arizona on foot ? and about the complicity of President Felipe Calderon's government in its refusal to address the problem of economic justice. The Mexican government denied her request. She was later given the award with little fanfare in Tucson. Most recently, in 2008, the Lannan Foundation awarded her its Cultural Freedom Award.

According to Kat Rodriguez, coordinator of Derechos, there has been no response to date from the FBI, who was notified of the threat the day after it was received. When Rodriguez attempted to follow up, she was told that a customary five to seven business day waiting period was to be expected for "all complaints." When it was reiterated that this was a death threat, the FBI staff person asked, "Well, did they give a time frame?"

Rodriguez responded that the letter states that a half-million dollars has been offered for "Garcia's head," to which the staff person responded, "Well, I still think we should wait the five to seven business days." This

conversation, explained Rodriguez, happened June 11, the day after the murder of the guard at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

To date, there has been no contact made by the FBI to either Garcia or the office of Derechos Humanos.

Meanwhile, Garcia continues to be in the spotlight because of her work with Derechos Humanos. The group's mission centers on bringing attention to the human cost of militarizing the U.S.-México border. Since the 1990s when border policies began to change and the numbers tracked, the remains of more than 5,000 men, women and children have been recovered on the U.S.-México border.

For more than five years, Derechos Humanos has compiled data on the human remains recovered on the Arizona-Sonora border, where more than half of all border crossing attempts are made. Data from the medical examiner shows that the remains of at least 29 individuals were recovered in June -- nearly one per day. Since Derechos Humanos began collecting data in 2002 -- that is when U.S. border policies shifted migration into the deadly and desolate Arizona desert -- the remains of at least 1,769 people have been recovered.

For more information and to see a complete list of recovered remains, visit http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net. Derechos Humanos considers this information the property of the community and encourages sharing the information about this tragic reality to anyone and everyone who will listen.

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