



GHRC Visits Political Prisoners in Guatemala City Jail

The arrests of Rigoberto Juárez and Domingo Baltazar are the latest in a list of at least 15 Maya Q'anjob'al activists from Huehuetenango who have been arrested without any evidence against them since 2012.

“We need development, but the reality is underdevelopment. Where is the State present? It is only there to repress.”

- Rigoberto Juárez



Photo: Quimy de Leon

Rigoberto Juárez, left, and Domingo Baltazar spoke with GHRC and Prensa Comunitaria in Guatemala City's jail in zone 18. The men have been targeted for their opposition to harmful development projects in Huehuetenango.

On August 14, 2015, GHRC and Prensa Comunitaria sat across from Rigoberto Juárez and Domingo Baltazar, two of many land rights defenders currently in Guatemala City's jail facing trumped-up criminal charges in Guatemala. The visit represented an effort to document conditions, take testimony, and provide moral support.

Although both Juárez and Baltazar were accused of “participating in the illegal detention of workers,” human rights organizations and observers believe their arrests to be a response to their efforts to defend indigenous rights and ancestral lands. Both are respected leaders in the Q'anjob'al community and were integral in the formation of the regional Plurinational Government in Northern Huehuetenango. They had been publicly involved in peaceful efforts to oppose transnational hydroelectric and logging projects in the region, as well as the effort to reopen the Snuq' JolomKonob' community radio station in Santa Eulalia.

“There is great interest in appropriating the natural resources of our territory,” Juárez explained.

Juárez and Baltazar were arrested on March 24, 2015 as they walked down 6th avenue in Guatemala City, visiting the capital to denounce abuses against themselves and their communities. Their defense lawyer, Ricardo Cajas, who contested the apparently warrantless arrest, says he was assaulted when he confronted police officers on the issue.

Their detention follows an all-too-common pattern; over a dozen Maya Q'anjob'al activists from Huehuetenango have been arrested without probable cause since 2012. All have been targeted because of their political opposition to harmful development policies and to specific large-scale mining operations, hydroelectric dams and other megaprojects. This criminalization occurs through an intentional abuse of the legal system in order to intimidate activists and quell dissent, and are often subject to arbitrary detentions, accused of serious criminal charges (including “terrorism”), and can spend months of pre-trial detention in inhumane conditions. Due to the lack of evidence corroborating the charges, the cases are typically dismissed - but the damage is done.

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GHRC Mission

The Guatemala Human Rights Commission (GHRC) is a nonprofit, grassroots, solidarity organization dedicated to promoting human rights in Guatemala and supporting communities and activists who face threats and violence. GHRC documents and denounces abuses, educates the international community, and advocates for policies that foster peace and justice.

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Letter from the Director

Dear Supporters,

The year 2015 will go down in history in Guatemala as the year a government fell to corruption charges; the year a President and Vice President went from office to jail; and the year that a diverse and newly energized civil society movement emerged to demand accountability from public officials.

At GHRC, we did our part to support transparency and accountability. In the spring, we pushed for the extension of CICIG's mandate and urged the US to continue to provide funding. As more corruption allegations came to light and public protests continued, we intensified our US advocacy work, amplifying our partners' concerns, including their call for the President to resign and for elections to be postponed.

The US chose to support "stability" over reform. Ambassador Robinson stood by President Pérez Molina until the bitter end, despite overwhelming evidence that he was directly involved in some of the most corrupt political dealings on record. The US also maintained public support for elections, despite CICIG's revelations that political parties and candidates were receiving a significant portion of their funding through illicit activities. In September voters turned out in record numbers, though the slate of elected candidates raises doubts about continued reform. The new President, Jimmy Morales, himself has little experience and was backed by military hard-liners.

While political upheaval and corruption cases took center stage, 2015 also saw ongoing abuses and government repression. Threats and attacks have spiked against environmental activists as communities continue to oppose mining, hydroelectric dams and harmful agricultural practices. The right to prior consultation was blatantly ignored, freedom of expression undermined, and access to justice remained a constant struggle. Criminalization of community leaders has been an increasingly common and particularly harmful tactic, as I saw first-hand during a visit to a Guatemala City jail.

GHRC activists were essential in raising international awareness about these abuses. Supporters signed petitions to denounce illegal mining and the assassination of an environmental defender in Petén. You also urged the US congress to pass strong human rights conditions on funding to Guatemala, and you helped us celebrate the work of Prensa Comunitaria, our 2015 recipient of the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award.

This international advocacy and solidarity is an indispensable component of the struggle for human rights in Guatemala, and sustained pressure will be needed to address US policies that continue to have detrimental impacts in Guatemala.

Nowhere is this clearer than with the "Alliance for Prosperity Plan," the US-led response to the 2014 child migration crisis. The plan promotes an economic model that will exacerbate poverty, contribute to forced displacement, and likely create more economic refugees from the region. In contrast, important human rights protections are absent.

As we begin 2016, there are many reasons to be hopeful. Eighteen former military were arrested for wartime atrocities and their testimonies are already being heard in court. The Sepur Zarco sexual slavery trial also opened in early February. Organizations and social movements across the nation continue to demand redress for land rights violations. With your support, we will be working to ensure these efforts can continue.

Sincerely,

Kelsey Alford-Jones
Executive Director



GHRC staff members met with political prisoners Rigoberto Juárez and Domingo Baltazar, two of many land rights defenders currently in Guatemala City's jail. Photo: Quimiy de Leon

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Guatemalan prosecutors have done little to address this pattern, in some cases they continue sham trials despite a lack of evidence, or rely solely on testimony of employees of the very companies that want to ensure their continued operations.

The cost to these political prisoners and their families is exceedingly high. Time spent in jail takes a tremendous physical and emotional toll on both defenders and their families, and even after being released, many continue to suffer secondary consequences. They suffer financially due to legal fees and family travel expenses to visit the jail, and can encounter problems returning to work after their release.

Since their arrest, Juárez and Baltazar have remained incarcerated in Guatemala City. Their shared cell, a small room filled so full with bunk beds there is barely room to walk, is one of the safer areas of the jail. As in most Guatemalan jails and prisons, a hierarchy of inmates controls most of what goes on, and luckily in Sector 13, peoples' basic needs are met.

Other concerns are often more pressing. The prison authority and

police, for example, are responsible for transporting them to Santa Eulalia for each court date. They missed their first hearing because no transportation was made available; they missed a second hearing set for July 17 because officials picked them up at 6:00am for an 8:30am hearing. What is typically a 6-7 hour drive took far longer when the police made over a dozen stops along the way, not arriving until late at night. Having missed the hearing by a full day, they simply turned around and went back.

"We were made to ride in the back of a pickup with three others, under the sun and rain, without eating,

without being allowed to go to the bathroom," the men told GHRC.

Despite expressing no urgent security concerns, Juárez and Baltazar spoke to GHRC in hushed voices, sometimes almost a whisper.

"We need development," Juárez explained, "but the reality is underdevelopment. Where is the State present? It is only there to repress. Those of us who are opposed are considered insolent and poorly educated. We are listening to what our ancestors tell us, who have different rules and different ways of thinking. We put hope in God's help, but also in the strength of many people."

OTHER CASES:

Saúl Méndez and Rogelio Velásquez were unjustly detained from May 2012 until January 2013. They were rearrested in August 2013, accused of complicity to murder, and in 2014 were sentenced to over 33 years in prison. The sentence was finally overturned on appeal; they were released in January 2016. Both were likely targeted due to opposition to Escoener Hydraulic Energy, a Spanish company that plans to build a series of hydroelectric dam projects in Huehuetenango.

In 2012, 11 people from Santa Cruz Barillas were detained under martial law, and spent between five and eight months in jail on trumped-up charges before being released due to lack of evidence. They had been active in local opposition to another hydroelectric project, Hidro Santa Cruz, owned by another Spanish company.

LA PUYA:**US Congress Calls on Guatemalan President to Halt Illegal Mining at La Puya**

Opposition continues at La Puya four years after residents first physically blocked the entrance to a mining operation in their community – an ongoing act of non-violent resistance that has received global support. And in the last three months, residents' arguments against the mine – legal, environmental and ethical – have been supported by the US Congress, the Municipal authorities, and Guatemalan courts.

Yet the US-owned mine continues to operate.

On October 26, 2015, 12 Congressional members sent a letter to interim Guatemalan President Alejandro Maldonado Aguirre to raise concerns about abuses related to the El Tambor gold mine in San Pedro Ayampuc, Guatemala. Supported by GHRC, the letter calls on the President to use his authority to uphold human rights and to ensure that the mine's owner—the US-based company Kappes, Cassiday & Associates (KCA)—promptly halts its illegal operations.

The letter responded to a Guatemalan court ruling on July 15, 2015, that found EXMINGUA, KCA's subsidiary, has been operating the mine without valid municipal permits, did not consult with affected communities before the project began in accordance with Guatemalan and International law, and that the Environmental Impact Assessment was plagued with serious deficiencies. The court ordered an injunction against mining activities at El Tambor, a decision upheld after the company's appeal.

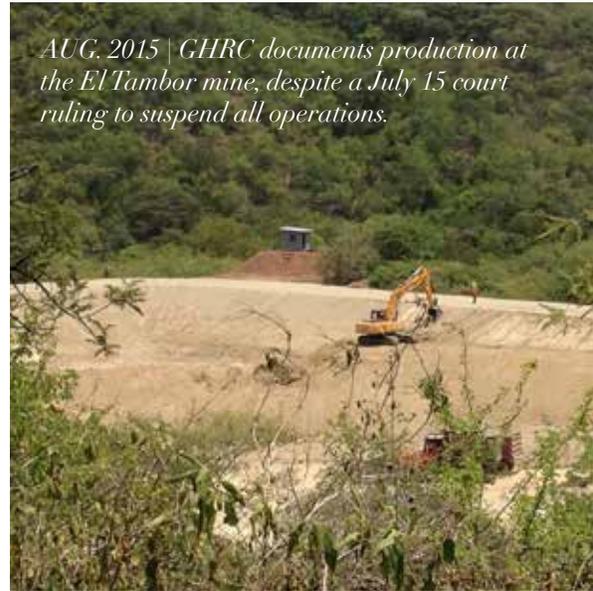
When mining continued, community members and their lawyers requested the municipal government grant temporary protection measures, which were approved. On Jan. 5, officials from the municipality of San Pedro Ayampuc, accompanied by police officers, arrived at La Puya to take suspend work at the mine. Officials sealed the entrance to the project with tape and banners in order to enforce the measures. This, too, was ineffective; in the early morning hours of Jan. 6, company employees and riot police arrived at La Puya and removed the tape and banners, allowing machinery and workers back into the mine site. Community members are now calling on Guatemala's highest court to confirm the municipal injunction that demands closure of the mine.

The ongoing illegal mining operation is just one of many abuses KCA's mine has caused at La Puya. There has been no justice for Yolanda Oquelí, shot in 2012 when leaving the community blockade, nor has there been redress for the excessive use of force used by police in 2014 during the violent eviction to force access to the mine.

Activists have also faced trumped-up charges, and the US Congressional letter specifically called on the Guatemalan government to take active steps to release wrongfully imprisoned community leaders and initiate dialogue with residents to peacefully resolve the conflict.

GHRC's support continues for the peaceful opposition to the mine at the Puya. Staff meet frequently with community members and their lawyers, and in August spoke directly with municipal authorities. GHRC is also urging the US Embassy to take concrete steps to address the illegal activities of a US company.

AUG. 2015 | GHRC documents production at the El Tambor mine, despite a July 15 court ruling to suspend all operations.



JAN. 2016 | Officials from San Pedro Ayampuc sealed the entrance to the El Tambor mine. Photo: Resistencia Pacifica La Puya



JAN. 2016 | Representatives from La Puya protest in front of the Constitutional Court in Guatemala City; calling on the court to confirm legal closure of the mine.

Civil Society Petition Demands Justice for Killing of Activist, Ecocide in Petén

The Petén lowland rainforests of northern Guatemala have been besieged for years by illegal logging, drug trafficking, cattle farming and oil exploration. Since the late 1990s, environmental damage in the region has been exacerbated by yet another phenomenon: a booming palm oil industry that has made Guatemala one of the world's top producers. Encircled by these economic giants, human rights defenders continue to risk their lives to save their environment.

On Nov. 30, men and women from communities battling the destructive effects of palm oil production held a press conference in Guatemala City to deliver a civil society petition – signed by nearly 50,000 individuals – to Guatemala's Attorney General Thelma Aldana. The petition, spearheaded by GHRC, ActionAid and Friends of the Earth, echoes local community demands for an immediate investigation into the contamination of the Pasión River as well as into the murder of environmental activist Rigoberto Lima Choc. Lima, a school teacher and indigenous leader, had been one of the first to report a mass die-off of fish along the river this past summer; on Sept. 18, he was shot dead by unknown assailants outside a local courthouse in Sayaxché, Petén.

Community members first noticed a smaller die-off of fish in the Pasión River in April 2015, but it drew little national attention. Then, in early June, residents observed tens of thousands of dead fish floating on the river's surface.

The contamination appeared to be directly linked to overflow from the processing plant of palm oil company Reforestadora Palma de Petén S.A. (REPSA), which first timidly admitted responsibility

before later denying involvement. At no point were community members warned of the spill, but it quickly became apparent that the water was poisoned. Later reports have estimated that at least 23 different species of fish and other aquatic life were found dead, affecting the economic livelihood of at least 12,000 people from 17 communities. The incident has since been referred to as an "ecocide" by community members and experts alike.



GHRC supported a press conference highlighting the detrimental impacts of Palm Oil in communities.

"We deplore these incidents," said Lima in a June 17 press conference. "As community members, we are indignant. Truthfully, there are people who are unable to make a living – they depend on the river and they are being left penniless."

Three months later, on September 17, REPSA was ordered to suspend its operations while an investigation into the source of the contamination is carried out. The next day, Rigoberto Lima Choc was assassinated in broad daylight.

Many media outlets have reported the likely connection between Lima's assassination and his public demands to investigate REPSA's alleged role in the contamination. In addition to his murder, three other human rights activists—

Lorenzo Pérez, Hermelindo Asij and Manuel Pérez—were held by REPSA employees for almost 12 hours, threatened with being burned alive, before they were finally released.

During the Nov. 30 press conference, Juan Castro of the Association of Mayan Lawyers gave an account of a recent hearing on palm oil in Guatemala, held at the IACHR in Washington, DC. Activists also hoped that choosing Nov. 30, the date of the kickoff of the Climate Summit in Paris, would increase pressure on both domestic and international leaders to do more to protect communities defending their environment.

The violence surrounding the REPSA case is representative of a broader pattern of attacks against land rights activists, a phenomenon that many Guatemalan human rights groups consider to be linked to an unjust economic model that favors large companies over the rights and economic livelihoods of local communities.

"The prevailing model in Guatemala is known as accumulation by dispossession," said Jorge Santos, a member of Guatemalan human rights group UDEFEGUA, in a recent interview with Telesur. "[It is] based on the commercialization of natural resources, mining extraction, hydroelectric projects to lower costs for industry, and monocultures, particularly sugar cane and African palm."

GHRC, a coordinator of the joint petition, continues to support the case as communities seek justice for the death of Lima and the contamination of the river, which to date remains "under investigation."

Activists Discuss Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders at IACHR Hearings

Though it was corruption that ultimately brought down former president Pérez Molina, the protests against him took place amid a broader crackdown on human-rights defenders of all stripes— including human-rights lawyers, journalists, labor activists, and indigenous groups resisting large-scale development projects.

This past October, members of Guatemala’s Human Rights Convergence and other civil-society organizations participated in hearings at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and met with US government officials to discuss these challenges.

In back-to-back hearings, petitioners highlighted the defamation and harassment of lawyers and expert witnesses in the ongoing genocide case against former Guatemalan leader Efraín Ríos Montt.

Pérez Molina, a former military general who vociferously denied that any genocide had taken place, was himself implicated in atrocities against indigenous Guatemalans in

testimony that emerged during the trial.

In another hearing, lawyers and community leaders emphasized the precarious and vulnerable situation of communities surrounded by African Palm production, where residents suffer harassment from palm-oil companies, contamination of their water supply, and other environmental problems.

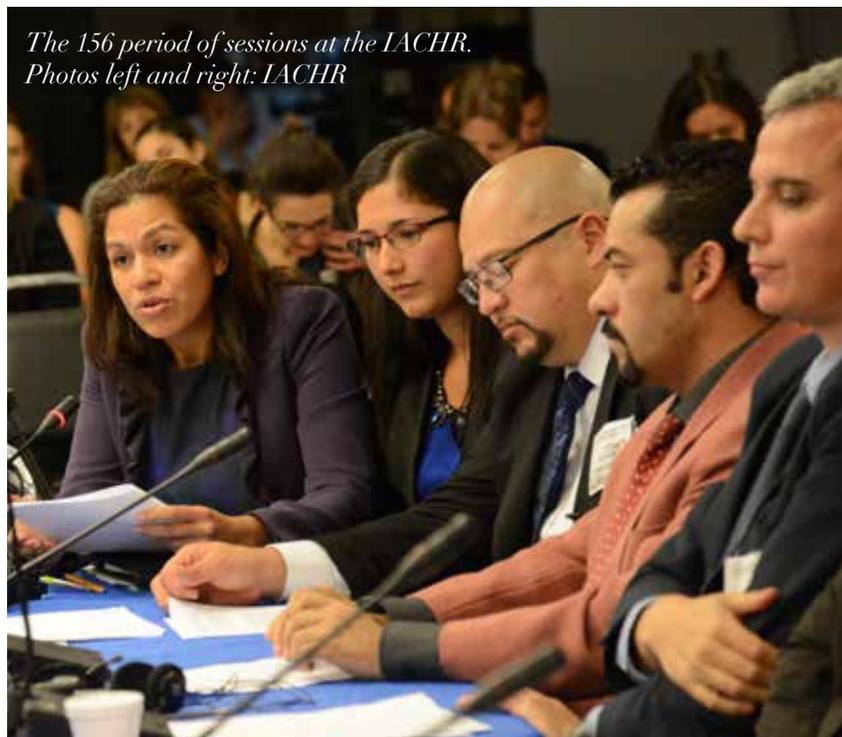
On September 18, indigenous activist Rigoberto Lima Choc was assassinated outside a local courthouse in the northern town of Sayaxché, Petén. Lima was one of the first to publicly denounce the actions of the palm company REPSA for its alleged involvement in the contamination of the La Pasión River.

Just weeks later, Alex Reynoso— an environmental activist who has organized against the Tahoe Resources silver mine in southern Guatemala—survived a second assassination attempt. An earlier attempt last year claimed the life of his daughter, 16-year-old Topacio Reyes.

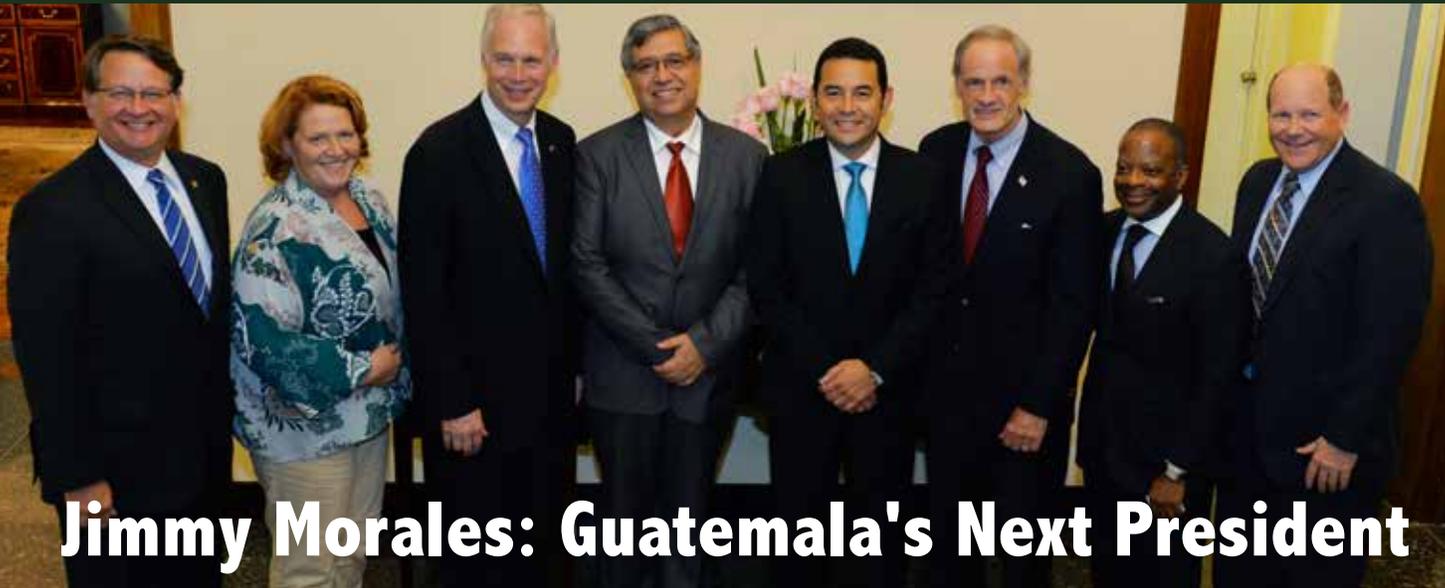
Many human-rights organizations view these attacks as part of an ongoing pattern of repression against land-rights defenders, as well as a test for the transitional government—one the administration has failed. They accuse the government of dispatching security forces to protect transnational corporations—and suppress any resistance to corporate misconduct—while failing to properly respond to attacks against community leaders.

In a separate hearing on extractive industries, Commissioner Rose-Marie Antoine called the violence against indigenous activists resisting their own displacement a “total disgrace for democracies in the region.”

In all these cases, the Guatemalan government has categorically denied any responsibility or wrongdoing. “We’re sorry to see that the state maintains its same position,” said Center for Human Rights Legal Action Director Juan Francisco Soto, “even though we now have a new president, and new appointed officials in the country.”



The 156 period of sessions at the IACHR. Photos left and right: IACHR



Jimmy Morales: Guatemala's Next President

Riding a wave of anti-establishment sentiment, Jimmy Morales—a comedian with no political experience and backed by military hard-liners—has been elected Guatemala's next president.

Morales was inaugurated on Jan. 14 just days after he suffered an early political setback related to his Cabinet. On Jan. 6, one of his top advisers, Edgar Ovalle Maldonado, was among a group of ex-military leaders accused of crimes against humanity. For now, Ovalle cannot face prosecution due to his status as an incoming lawmaker, though Attorney General Thelma Aldana has requested his immunity be lifted, and the appeals process has reached the Constitutional Court.

Morales saw his popularity surge amid a series of corruption scandals that led to mass citizen protests, the arrest of several high-level government officials, and the resignation of former president Otto Pérez Molina this September. Capitalizing on his reputation as a political outsider, Morales achieved an unexpected first-round win in September before defeating former first lady Sandra Torres in the October 25 runoff election.

Morales, like his opponent Sandra Torres, promised efforts to promote transparency and root out corruption. But he's drawn criticism

for his vague policies, his comedic reliance on racist, sexist, and homophobic tropes, and the fact that some of his backers—including the founders of his political party, the National Convergence Front (FCN)—are conservative members of the military linked to war crimes from the country's three-decade armed conflict.

Though some Guatemalans are cautiously optimistic about the future, many remain skeptical that

“The social movements we’re experiencing may mean that someday we’ll have different options—candidates who really represent the people.”

- Iduvina Hernández

Morales will be able to pull the country out of its current political turmoil. “Nothing is going to change,” one voter said via Twitter—even as she cast her ballot.

In the past few months, many Guatemalans have lauded the transformative power of citizen

protests, and some outlets called the country a leader in a new “anti-corruption spring.” But failed electoral reforms and ongoing land rights conflicts have prompted some to ask: Has anything really changed in Guatemala?

Responding to that question at a panel discussion in DC, Daniel Pascual from the Committee for Campesino Unity stated that civil society has been armed with new allies, and the country's “social awakening” has given rise to a more informed and vigilant citizenry. With more people calling for justice, it will be ever more challenging for public officials not to act on behalf of the people.

Still, the vast majority of these urgent concerns—the ongoing militarization of public security, high rates of impunity, deep-rooted corruption, and increased violence against environmental activists, among a collapsing healthcare system and other issues—are issues President-elect Morales has barely mentioned. To date, he's shared no plan or inclination to address them.

“Neither Morales nor Torres represent the change we need,” said Iduvina Hernández. “But the social movements we’re experiencing may mean that someday we’ll have different options—candidates who really represent the people.”

The Alliance for Prosperity Plan: An “Alliance for Rural Poverty”?

One year ago, at the behest of the United States, the Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran governments came together to create a plan, an “Alliance for Prosperity,” to address “structural and multi-dimensional causes of migration” from Central America.

The plan, that will receive \$750 million in US funds and – in theory – matching funds from regional governments, is a reaction to the unprecedented numbers of Central American refugees that arrived at the US border in 2014. Many in Guatemala fled a complex set of conditions that include severe rural poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and widespread violence and impunity – issues that GHRC has documented for decades – exacerbated in recent years by acute problems, such as government corruption in the health sector and increasing large-scale resource

“Corporate America wants to come.”

- Vice President Biden

extraction projects. Analysts and activists alike agree that addressing rural poverty, creating strong and accountable institutions, and strengthening rule of law are essential to improving conditions in Guatemala. Yet proposals for how to do so vary dramatically.

Community leaders, human rights activists and some Guatemalan congressmen have proposed holistic policies to address these challenges that focus on combating historic exclusion and racism and recognize the right to consultation and local empowerment as pillars of sustainable development.

These have been ignored. Instead, the US has seized the political

moment to reinforce neoliberal policies and strengthen the business climate for large national and transnational companies.

“Corporate America wants to come,” Vice President Biden assured politicians and business leaders from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador during a speech in March 2015. “There’s great opportunities in human capital here. [...] We’re ready to work with you to get more out of the free trade agreement you have with us, and integrate your economies with each other by... reducing tariffs, investing [in] infrastructure, and borders, streamlining customs, partnering with each other and your neighbors on issues like roads and energy.”

Guatemala’s private sector embraces this approach wholeheartedly, envisioning local migration from rural areas to larger towns where “human capital” will get funneled into entrepreneurial programs and job training for corporations that needs cheap labor (call centers and sweatshops, for example). This frees up arable land that can be industrialized and dedicated to cash crops for export (such as African palm and sugar cane). Changes to the justice system will focus on creating a sound investment environment; infrastructure will be improved to insure mines, refineries and other industries have the energy needed to operate and access to good highways to efficiently transport export goods to market.

Meanwhile, institutional strengthening, transparency and accountability – the most obvious areas to invest after recent scandals -- receive little attention and almost



no funding. And while the Plan proposes to strengthen Guatemala’s tax collection agency, the plan does not mention institutions that have recently been most plagued with corruption scandals, such as the health sector.

Not surprisingly, there is little support for the Alliance for Prosperity Plan in Guatemala at the community level. Many don’t even know it exists. The Guatemalan government has not held a public forum in any of their designated “priority” municipalities, focusing instead on lobbying in the US to promote the plan.

“This is a plan for poverty, not prosperity,” one Guatemalan activist told GHRC in October. “This promotes a regional economic model that has been principally responsible for perpetuating inequality and forced migration.” Indeed, the focus of the Plan is not on the most urgent needs of vulnerable communities in areas where families depend on subsistence agriculture, and even the most basic state services are lacking.

The old argument that profits will “trickle-down” to benefit the rural poor has yet to become reality in Guatemala, and the projects

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promoted by the US and Guatemala as the solution to poverty are almost unanimously rejected by local populations. These conflicts over land use have already triggered government repression and the killing of human rights activists.

In fact, the very industries bolstered by the plan have been some of the worst abusers of labor rights. To depend on them as a solution for rural development, with no mention of the right to consultation, or protections for vulnerable communities, is a recipe for failure.

The Plan seeks to increase the labor force, yet mentions no commitment

to enforce existing labor laws (Guatemala currently faces arbitration from the US under CAFTA for failure to enforce these laws); nor does it commit to strengthening the Labor Ministry, protecting the right to unionize, ensuring employer accountability in regards to abuses in the workplace, or guaranteeing a living wage. All will be essential to ensuring sustainable labor opportunities in Guatemala.

The true social cost of growing inequality and dispossession in the region under the Alliance for Prosperity will likely be masked for a time, as the US is simultaneously seeking to limit the numbers of

migrants and refugees arriving to the US. This has already begun through border militarization, pressure on Mexico to increase deportations, and pressure on Central American governments to prevent migrants from leaving.

GHRC advocated heavily for strong human rights conditions on US funding for the Alliance for Prosperity, which Congress passed in the FY'16 Omnibus spending bill, and we will be closely monitoring their impact. Yet growing conflict in rural areas and attacks against land rights activists already points to anything but "prosperity."

HUMAN RIGHTS CASE UPDATES

18 Ex-Military Leaders Arrested for Crimes Against Humanity

Eighteen former military leaders — including former generals, a former army chief of staff, and a former military intelligence chief — were arrested on Jan. 6 on criminal charges related to massacres and disappearances from the internal armed conflict. Fourteen of the arrests pertain to an investigation on a military base known as CREOMPAZ in Cobán (formerly Military Base 21), where the remains of hundreds of people have been found and where the identities of at least 97 people have been confirmed as individuals disappeared during the 1980s, when the ex-officials were in power. Four of the arrests relate to the disappearance of Marco Antonio Molina Theissen, a minor, in 1981. Twelve had trained at the US School of the Americas.

GHRC was one of the first international groups to gain access to CREOMPAZ in 2012 to observe the exhumation, and advocated for families to have improved access. The CREOMPAZ facility, which continues to serve as a regional UN Peacekeeping training base, has received US funding.

The handling of these cases will be a test for president-elect Jimmy Morales, who will take office on Jan. 14. It was rumored that one or more of those facing charges had been tapped to participate in the Morales' administration. One of Morales' closest allies and the president of his party, Edgar Justino Ovalle Maldonado, is also a suspect but could not be arrested due to his immunity. Attorney General Thelma Aldana announced her office requested the Supreme Court to lift Ovalle's immunity. The court denied the motion, but the decision has been appealed.

The cases also sparked controversy within the Defense Ministry when a high level official, acting, he said, in a personal capacity, filed a motion to annul the Constitutional article that explicitly exempts gross violations from amnesty. The motion was denied and the General was relieved of his post.

The Sepur Zarco Case Goes to Court

More than 30 years after dozens of Q'eqchi women suffered sexual violence and sexual slavery at the Sepur Zarco military outpost, 15 women, with the support of the Alliance to End Silence and Impunity, will have their day in court. The women, now in their 70s and 80s, are making history, as the trial opened Feb. 1. GHRC is present in the courtroom to observe the trial and will continue to send updates.

The Genocide Case Remains Stalled

After ongoing legal battles, the retrial in the genocide case scheduled for March 16. Ríos Montt, found guilty of genocide and war crimes in the 2013 trial, was diagnosed in August with dementia. Any new trial will be a closed-door proceeding, though plaintiffs hope to separate the legal proceedings of Ríos Montt and co-defendant Rodríguez Sanchez so the latter could have a public trial. Victims and their lawyers, despite these delays, remain committed to achieving justice.

Community Radio Activist Joins GHRC for Fall Speaking Tour

This fall our speaking tour featured community journalist Lorenzo Mateo Francisco from the Snuq' Jolom Konob' radio station in Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango. Throughout the month of November Lorenzo shared his moving story, talking with diverse audiences about the repression against the radio station and highlighting the dire situation of freedom of expression in Guatemala.

Lorenzo has been involved with the Snuq' Jolom Konob' station for 12 years, initially as a volunteer and now as the station's primary coordinator and member of its Board of Directors. The station, founded in 1999 and broadcasting in both Spanish and Q'anjob'al, has publicized timely information

"The mayor didn't want us to report on him having shot two community leaders, so he shut us down," Lorenzo explained. He has received threats for his work, but has remained active and has been integral in seeking support for the station and legal recourse to challenge its closure. Although the station is now broadcasting again online, its headquarters in Santa Eulalia remain shut down.

Lorenzo's story is not unique in Guatemala.

"Journalists throughout Guatemala face threats, censorship, arrest, and violence," he said. In one week alone in March 2015, three journalists were murdered. According to

Lorenzo also had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the International Mayan League and the Parlamento Maya.

The tour then headed to the Midwest, where Lorenzo's work piqued broad interest; the trip was full of radio and television interviews, public events, university talks, and meetings with key human rights organizations.

Local organizers in New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Chicago made the tour a success, particularly the Oberlin Students in Solidarity with Guatemala, the Inter-Religious Task Force on Central America, the Latin American Solidarity Committee, and the Chicago Religious Leadership



on hydroelectric projects planned in the region and has reported on corruption of local authorities. The Snuq' Jolom Konob radio station has not only been a useful tool for sharing information and news, but it has also played a vitally important role in protecting and promoting native culture and rights by broadcasting bilingually and thus helping to promote and maintain the Indigenous Q'anjob'al language.

Unfortunately, local reporters' active and hard-hitting investigative coverage has meant the station has been a target of repression and attacks, and it was illegally closed down by the mayor in January 2015.

the Guatemalan Observatory for Journalists at CERIGUA, there were over 108 attacks during 2015, making it "the most dangerous year for journalists in Guatemala." Numerous others have been criminalized for exercising their right to free speech.

The speaking tour started off in Washington, DC where Lorenzo, on behalf of Prensa Comunitaria, received GHRC's annual Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award. While in DC he met with the State Department, key leaders in the US Congress, and with the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Network. A third and integral piece of Lorenzo's visit was to connect with the Q'anjob'al community in the United States. To do so, he traveled to Omaha, Sioux City, San Diego, Los Angeles, Alamosa (Colorado), and Taos (New Mexico) with the generous support of the American Jewish World Service.

Lorenzo hopes the radio station can reopen as new elected officials take office.

Visit our website to learn more about Lorenzo, the Snuq' Jolom Konob radio station, and how you can get involved.

2015 ALICE ZACHMANN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AWARD:

Recognizing community media group Prensa Comunitaria



The Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defender's Award recognizes an individual, organization or community who has demonstrated a commitment to the defense of human rights through non-violent methods, and for which he/she has been exposed to threats, violence and/or other attacks.

GHRC was pleased to present this year's award to community media group *Prensa Comunitaria* on November 3 at St. Stephen's Church in Washington, DC. An audience of friends and colleagues in Guatemala also watched the event live via Ustream. Lorenzo Mateo Francisco -- a member of *Prensa Comunitaria* and the coordinator of his community's local radio station -- accepted the award on behalf of the media group, which includes almost 40 researchers and correspondents.

"I want to thank everyone who is here, and all those who are supporting our communities' struggles to defend our rights," said Lorenzo during the event. "I'm accepting this award in the name of my family, *Prensa Comunitaria* ... But I have a deep pain in my heart, because freedom of expression in my country has been restricted."



GHRC selected *Prensa Comunitaria* for its commitment to grassroots journalism and its focus on documenting important community struggles that often receive little to no coverage in the mainstream media.

Prensa Comunitaria is a network of communicators – including analysts, photojournalists, reporters and investigators – who work at the community level to document stories that affect residents' lives, often through the use of personal testimonies. The network has been hugely important in raising awareness about under-reported community movements, efforts to

defend land and human rights, and prominent human rights legal cases.

One of *Prensa Comunitaria's* regions of focus has been northern Huehuetenango, in the western highlands of Guatemala. The area has experienced growing social conflict in recent years, particularly around mines and hydroelectric projects. Members of *Prensa Comunitaria* have provided in-depth investigations, analysis and coverage of local resistance movements, government repression and militarization, attacks against community radio, and the criminalization of community leaders from the region.

Journalism is a dangerous profession in Guatemala. "The Guatemalan government hasn't implemented any effective mechanisms to protect journalists. In fact, [public officials] been directly involved in aggressions against the press, in particular against alternative community media," explained Kelsey Alford-Jones, Executive Director of GHRC.

In this context, correspondents from *Prensa Comunitaria* have continued to challenge the systems that seek to silence them. Their valuable work represents an ongoing effort to defend the right to freedom of expression and to freedom of the press.



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