



El Quetzal

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Forty Years of Standing with the Guatemalan People

Forty years ago, Sister Alice Zachmann founded the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA. Alice, a School Sister of Notre Dame, taught first grade and other grades for many years in St. Paul and then served as a school principal. Her order had a mission in Guatemala, and Alice, after visiting several times, expressed interest in becoming a missionary. But Guatemalans she had met on her trips asked her to become a missionary in reverse: Go to Washington, DC, and tell your government and the US people what is happening in Guatemala. Alice spoke no Spanish, had no money to start an organization, and knew no one in DC, but she understood the need. The Guatemalan army was committing massacres, wiping hundreds of villages off the map in a genocidal scorched-earth campaign. The US government was working hand-in-hand with the Guatemalan army to defeat a small insurgency, and the Reagan administration denied the reports of massacres.



Alice Zachmann at our 40th Anniversary Celebration received a Lifetime Achievement Award from GHRC.

Out of a small room at Catholic University, Alice began disseminating the truth about the atrocities in Guatemala, advocating to end US support to the Guatemalan army, and supporting Guatemalans in danger simply for defending their rights.



Isabel Solis, Veronica Serrano Tama, and Corie Welch

Alice has always said her goal is to for GHRC to close; for there to be no need for an organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of the Guatemalan people. That need, however, has remained and now is especially urgent. With elections approaching next year, and all institutions—including the Supreme Electoral Tribunal—co-opted by corrupt forces, the Guatemalan congress is considering a bill to broaden the use of force in demonstrations, including lethal force. The congress is also considering a bill to grant full impunity, including retroactively, to anyone suspected or convicted of crimes against humanity during the internal armed conflict. More than a dozen prosecutors and judges known for their integrity have fled into exile in 2022, rather than face imprisonment. Guatemala's most prominent journalist remains jailed on spurious charges, along with two leading female prosecutors. Other journalists at risk have fled the country. The Guatemalan government is systematically dismantling the gains made after the signing of the Peace Accords 25 years ago, and repression will continue to increase.

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GHRC Mission

The Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (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 Directors

Dear Friends,

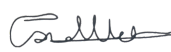
Corrupt forces have gained even more momentum in Guatemala this year, creating a situation unseen since the signing of the Peace Accords. Now, 25 judges and prosecutors are living in exile. With the departure and replacement of Jordán Rodas as Human Rights Ombudsman, the last remaining institution in Guatemala has been overtaken by the “Pacto de Corruptos.” For those in the fight against corruption and impunity, Guatemala is no longer a safe place. With rising criminalization and violent attacks against anyone that speaks out against the powers that be, defenders are facing serious, life-threatening risks.

From Huehuetenango to El Estor and everywhere in between, GHRC remains committed to standing in solidarity with defenders on the front lines of protecting human rights. We continue to accompany and support those under attack in Guatemala and elevate their demands to policymakers and government officials in DC.

This year, much of our work has focused on supporting women human rights defenders in Guatemala. In the context of human rights backsliding, violence against women and overall rates of femicide have increased significantly. In spite of the increased attacks and historical gender-based violence, women's leadership in Guatemala continues to serve as the backbone of the Guatemalan social movement. As an organization led by women, we are honored to carry out this work.

As we look towards the next year, we are prepared to follow the example of the brave women we accompany, never giving up the fight for what is right.

In solidarity,



Corie Welch

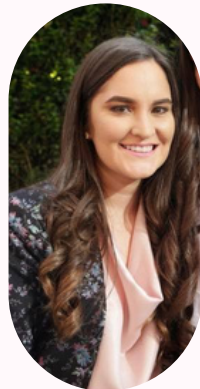


Isabel Solis



Verónica Serrano Tama

GHRC Welcomes Verónica



This fall Verónica Serrano Tama joined our team as Co-Director in the Washington office. She has been committed for years to international development and human rights in Latin America. Verónica holds an LL.M. in National and Global Health Law from Georgetown University Law Center, a M.S. in International and Transnational Law from the University of La Rioja, a certificate in fundraising from New York University, and a bachelor's degree in law.

Before joining GHRC, Verónica was a Human Rights Fellow at the external Office of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion. She worked as a research assistant at the O'Neill institute in areas related to women's rights and development. Previously, she interned at the UN in the Office of the President of the General Assembly, where she worked in areas related to global health, climate change, and gender equality. In Ecuador, she worked in a pro bono office with victims of gender and domestic violence.

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Guatemala's lobbying firms are doing their part on Capitol Hill to sell a narrative of stability and portray Guatemala as an excellent country for US business investment. Collaborating closely with the US government on migration—that is, stopping migrants from crossing through Guatemala on their way to the US—has won the Guatemalan government favor with the Biden Administration. In turn, the US government is giving Guatemala a free pass on human rights, the occasional wrist slap notwithstanding. In an October ceremony at the very military base where Guatemala's most prominent journalist is detained, the US ambassador presented the Guatemalan army with dozens of vehicles, valued at \$4.4 million, for use by brigades concentrated along the borders—in spite of documented misuse of previous such donations.

We are proud to stand with the Guatemalan people at this time of urgent need. We're grateful to you and all our supporters who have made our continued work possible and look forward to fighting for a brighter future.



GHRC Human Rights Delegation Confirms Worst Fears



Prensa Comunitaria Office, Guatemala City

This year, the trend of rising violence against human rights defenders has continued unabated. According to mid-year data from the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (UDEFEUGA), 589 aggressions against defenders occurred in the first six months of 2022. During the first two years of the Giammattei administration, 2,646 aggressions against defenders were registered, already surpassing the 2,260 aggressions registered during the Pérez Molina administration.

Diving into the human experience side of these statistics and in response to calls from our partners for accompaniment and for greater visibility of the attacks they're facing as human rights defenders, we organized an emergency GHRC Human Rights Delegation that visited Guatemala from July 23-30. For seven days, our group of eight human rights activists, academics, and practitioners traveled across Eastern Guatemala meeting with a broad range of human rights defenders, all of whom are at risk for their work fighting for human rights in the country. Defined by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), a human rights defender is someone "who individually or with others, act[s] to promote or protect human rights in a peaceful manner." We met with transitional justice lawyers, journalists, Indigenous land defenders, human rights researchers, accompaniment groups, and the Human Rights Ombudsman, listening to their testimonies and documenting patterns of violence.

The week began in Guatemala City, where we received a private tour of the "House of Memory," a museum established in 2014 by the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) to

educate the public, particularly future generations, about the history of Guatemala to prevent the repetition of past human rights violations. We then met with General Director of CALDH Héctor Reyes to hear more about threats to transitional justice cases. We also met with journalists Quimy de León and Nelton Rivera from *Prensa Comunitaria*, as well as General Coordinator of UDEFEGUA Jorge Santos. We then traveled east to El Estor to meet with Q'eqchi community leader and resistance member Eduardo Bin and get an up-close look at Fenix Mine, which has been responsible for numerous human rights violations and serious environmental damage.

Afterwards, we made our way north to Alta Verapaz, where we met with another El Estor resistance member in hiding, after a brutal attack on her home in May, and members of the Campesino Development Committee of the Highlands along with recently evicted families from the community of Las Pilas. We then moved on to Rabinal to hear from Jesus Tecu of the Rabinal Legal Clinic. Finally, we returned to Guatemala City, stopping at the resistance camps of La Puya and Santa Cruz de Chínautla. We ended our trip with a last meeting with Jordán Rodas in his final days as Human Rights Ombudsman.

The experience confirmed our worst fears: Defenders are facing serious backlash in the wake of the destruction of the rule of law in Guatemala and these attacks are not isolated incidents, but part of a larger pattern of aggression against defenders across the country.

"I was here in 2018, and I'm very sad to say that things in Guatemala haven't gotten any better. They've gotten much worse."

~Andrea Doll, three-time GHRC delegation participant

Individuals who oppose the kleptocratic takeover of Guatemala by powerful elites with historical ties to corruption and human rights violations that occurred during the internal armed conflict are met with a coordinated government strategy that includes criminalization, intimidation, harassment, surveillance, defamation, and serious violence. Especially concerning is the role of the state, which not only fails to protect defenders, but plays an active role in violating their rights.

All of the participating delegates, with the exception of one GHRC staff member, were US citizens, and as citizens, we are particularly concerned with the misappropriation of both aid and investment in Guatemala. We worry that, without stronger safeguards, even the best intentioned support – whether aid, investments, training, or other assistance – could be used against the Guatemalan people.

We remain committed to sharing what we saw and demanding more accountability from our government to take action against human rights violations.



Delegation Route

Fall Advocacy Tours Call for Stronger US Action

Amidst an ever worsening human rights situation in Guatemala, marked by state-led repression, GHRC continues to advocate for peace and justice in Guatemala. GHRC remains committed to advocating for US policy, demanding more accountability from our government to ensure that its policies do not foster human rights violations, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This fall, we organized four tours of human rights defenders from Central America to connect them directly to policy makers and government officials here in DC. As US policy continues to prioritize deterring migration, by way of security aid and economic investment, it is missing the mark on addressing the true root causes of migration like co-option of institutions and breakdown of rule of law. In fact, groups have documented how US security aid and foreign investment have contributed to repression, displacement, and human rights violations. In dozens of meetings held this fall, we opened space for defenders to share their concerns and ways that the US should be changing its policies on Central America.

GHRC Accompanies Survivors and Transitional Justice Advocates in Washington



From September 20-30, GHRC accompanied Indigenous survivors and transitional justice advocates Demesia Yat de Xol, of Sepur Zarco, and Maxima Garcia Valey de Ric, of Rabinal. Both women accepted human rights awards from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) on behalf of the Maya Achi women of Rabinal and the Maya Q'eqchi' women of Sepur Zarco for their tireless efforts to bring former civil patrollers and military officers to justice for sexual violence that occurred during the internal armed conflict. They shared their concerns for the future, including the failure of the reparations measures being carried out in their cases, rising threats against them for their work as Indigenous leaders, and increasing violent displacement in rural areas.

Activists from Across Central America Speak Out Against Worrisome Regional Trends



Just two weeks later, GHRC led a tour in DC with human rights defenders from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. This coalition of defenders was formed to address challenges in the region, like democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation. In particular, the group raised concerns with criminalization and violence against human rights defenders, activists and movements in the region. They called for stronger action from the US government, including robust support for civil society and human rights defenders. They also emphasized the need to suspend security aid to the region, which throughout the region is being used to further repress opposition voices and silence dissent.

Alice Zachmann Award Winner and Guatemala City Director Demand Accountability

Guatemala City Director Isabel Solis and Ixil Authority Don Miguel de León Ceto traveled to Washington for GHRC's 40th Anniversary Celebration, taking advantage of their visit to meet with policymakers and government officials. This year, our Guatemala Team has accompanied the Ixil Authorities as they have faced aggression from the municipality in Nebaj, including an attack and attempted eviction in September. Sharing their concerns, they asked for tighter restrictions on funding from the US, highlighting how even local authorities are connected to the larger movement in Guatemala to protect corrupt actors and promote impunity. They also met with civil society groups from both the US and Guatemala, sharing their experiences and strategies to better support defenders and Indigenous communities as attacks rise.



Human Rights Groups Raise Concerns with Policymakers in Washington After Facing Attacks



From November 14-18, four representatives from the Human Rights Convergence on Guatemala visited DC. The Convergence is made up of nine organizations in Guatemala and works together to strategize ways to best promote human rights, releasing coordinated communications and conducting advocacy within Guatemala and internationally. Fresh off an advocacy tour in Europe, Jorge Santos and Alessandra Ali from the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (UDEFEQUA), Nery Rodenas from the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop's Office, and Maudi Tzay from the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP) joined GHRC in DC to share their concerns. The group echoed demands from previous tours, asking that the US suspend security aid to Guatemala and lend its public support to Guatemalan civil society.

Interview with Guatemala City Director Isabel Solis

What inspired you to work in human rights?

Courage and rebellion inspire the search for justice. When I saw so much death, the older I got, the more I became aware of the injustices, and especially the motives and actors behind the injustices and the violations of the right to life.

As director of the Guatemala office, do you have a specific focus?

When I assumed the direction of GHRC in Guatemala, I realized how important GHRC's work is in the different regions of the country, and what I emphasized was the focus on indigenous peoples and women, linked to my knowledge; I have been working for more than 30 years in indigenous communities, in the defense of land, on the issue of women, and on the dispossession of natural resources. In addition to the deep racism, machismo, and exclusion, this is an unequal, impoverished society, and the effects of attacks on human rights are not the same across the board for all. Accompanying a people who suffer systematic dispossession and genocide is not easy in a society that views it as normal to attack the people, a society that believes that the people are opposed to development, a society, even, that thinks people should just turn the other cheek—a society that blames the people for the violence and diverts attention away from the real promoters of violence. This is how uphill the struggle of indigenous peoples is.

As a lawyer and human rights professional, why do you focus your accompaniment on women?

Accompanying criminalized women is not the same as accompanying criminalized men. For example, in times of attack, it is easier to protect one person than a whole family. But women continue to be responsible for the family; they bear the full weight of responsibility towards their children. This implies that accompanying and protecting a woman also includes protecting her children. And emergency responses must take into consideration several elements for the protection of the family. If a woman is facing a struggle, so is the family and even the community.

What are the dangers facing women defenders?

Imminent risk of assassination, disappearance, imprisonment, criminalization, and rape.

Forty-five percent of the attacks in the first six months of 2022 were against women human rights defenders. This figure represents a sharp increase. Attacks against women defenders in the first half of this year, at 263, reached more than 75 percent of last year's twelve-month total.

Is there any hope?

Hope can be found when countries like the US stop funding and sustaining a corrupt and criminal state like the state of Guatemala. Hope will be found when countries claiming to be developed learn to develop themselves and not depend on our natural resources or on our people. Hope is when the corrupt and the criminals leave the people in peace.

