

**Presentation of the 2013 Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award to the Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (UDEFEFEGUA)**

*Remarks by Claudia Samayoa, coordinator for UDEFEFEGUA*

UDEFEFEGUA is a dream born of solidarity, a desire to serve others, and a cry of condemnation. It began as a collective, inter-institutional effort; it was then brought into fruition by the voluntary work of Ruth del Valle and myself, with the support of Frank La Rue and the backing of the *Movimiento Nacional por los Derechos Humanos* (National Movement for Human Rights). As UDEFEFEGUA grew, it succeeded in supporting human rights work not only in Guatemala, through the *Convergencia por los Derechos Humanos* (Human Rights Coalition of Guatemala), but also regionally, with the *Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensores de Derechos Humanos* (Mesoamerican Initiative for Human Rights Defenders), and internationally, with the *Coalición de Organizaciones de Derechos Humanos de las Américas* (Coalition of Human Rights Organizations of the Americas).

Who we are and what we do is simple: we act as a support team for at-risk human rights defenders, so that they can manage their personal security and obtain the support they need from the Guatemalan government and the international community. Although we began as a small group of volunteers, supported by our spouses and occasional paid research assignments, we have become a full-time staff of 26 people with influence in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Mexico. We work for the protection of human rights defenders facing different forms of violence; we help provide security for journalists; and we provide legal aid for those who are being criminalized. We have developed mechanisms for protecting and assisting victims and witnesses in cases of serious human rights violations. Our analysis is valued by stakeholders of all types, from local communities to multinational organizations. And yes, we are an institution that stands up to powerful, arrogant, corrupt and criminal actors who have physically and verbally attacked us as an organization and as individuals... and even threatened our families.

During the 13 years that UDEFEFEGUA has been working, we have responded to 4,442 attacks, of which 3,158 have been against the right to defend human rights in Guatemala. We have publically denounced the murders of 184 human rights defenders. With the passage of time, we've recognized the need to train human rights defenders in safety and security practices. With the support of Protection International, we have developed different procedures to protect human rights defenders. Since 2009 we have led 187 workshops on personal safety and 167 workshops on risk analysis and security plans. In total we have trained 2,777 human rights

defenders in Guatemala and internationally -- from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico to San José, Costa Rica.

Since 2006 we've supported 1,850 legal complaints submitted to the Public Prosecutor's Office and attended 420 court hearings involving human rights defenders. Of the 11 paradigmatic cases in which UDEFEGUA has provided legal support, we have achieved convictions in the following cases: the murder of Israel Carias and his children, the assassination of Lisandro Guarcax, the killing of Emilia Quan, the Cotzal case (the first time in Guatemala's history that a guilty sentence was issued for the crime of torture, against the former mayor of that community), and the case of the deadly ambush at "Paraíso Privado" Cooperative. We have submitted the case of the murder of Florentín Gudiel and threats against his family to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and we hope for a verdict in 2014.

Since 2010, we have provided psychological support services to individuals, organizations, and communities on 140 occasions. We also administer an emergency fund that provides small donations to human rights defenders who do not have access to other resources.

We have coordinated with GRHC, LAWG, CIFCA, Front Line Defenders, OMCT, AI and other international organizations, as well as international missions for observation, lobbying, and the promotion of protective measures. We have worked with public prosecutors and attorneys general, judges and courts, police officials and investigators, interior ministers and their advisors, human rights ombudsmen and their assistants, the heads of COPREDEH, OACNUDH, and CICIG, and various embassies in order to generate and strengthen measures of observation, protection, and criminal prosecution of the attacks suffered by human rights defenders.

But most importantly we are a team of "firefighters" rushing to be present with human rights defenders in their moments of need... whether they are submitting an official document, looking for a missing person, identifying a corpse, imprisoned or awaiting release, attending a medical appointment, evaluating risk, or facing the justice system. We accompany their families in times of uncertainty and fear, and make sure that their children are not left unprotected. We stand in solidarity with defenders, be it to mourn a defeat or celebrate a victory.

We leave our homes in the middle of the night; we answer calls early in the morning; we move through dangerous areas; we travel by car, truck, boat, horse or on foot – this is all part of our work. We are an organization that devotes much of our time to exercising our right and our obligation to defend and promote rights and freedoms. Over the years we have received the support of international donors from Ireland, Holland, Spain, Basque Country, and Canada, as well as donations from US and Canadian solidarity, which has helped us carry out the various services that we provide.

We do our work because we believe in all of the human rights defenders in Guatemala and in the rest of the world. We do not expect thanks. A smile, a sigh of relief, or a renewed and deepened dedication to the daily work are more than enough. Today, however, we are honored and grateful to receive the *Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award* from the Guatemala Human Rights Commission. It comforts and strengthens us, especially as we travel this long and difficult road, made more arduous by the garrulous shouts of the extreme right; the implicit or explicit threats from drug traffickers, oligarchs, mayors and, sometimes, even presidents; the constant surveillance and eavesdropping; the stress of working under relentless pressure; and the challenge of being a team that works “one for all and all for one.”

Thank you very much... we reaffirm our dedication and our commitment to working for the right to defend human rights.

Washington, DC, November 14, 2013