



El Quetzal

HUMAN RIGHTS NEWS AND UPDATES

Summer 2022 | Issue #21

PUBLISHED BY THE GUATEMALA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION/USA

In Exile, Continuing the Fight

If you ask Francisco Chavez Raymundo to tell you his story, he is likely to respond with a question: “Where should I start? My story goes back more than 500 years.” He might then go on to explain how his father taught him to be proud of his Ixil heritage and to protect it and instilled in him a spirit of resistance. Francisco, who lived his very early years in the village of Xoloché, Nebaj, in the department of Quiché, and is known as La in his indigenous language, is a survivor of the genocide carried out against the Ixil people in the 1980s in Guatemala. He was, in fact, the first survivor to testify when the Ixil massacre was finally brought to trial.

In May, GHRC had the honor of hosting Francisco in Washington, DC where he spent a week meeting with congressional aides and State Department officials. Along with the Mayor of the Guatemalan town of Nebaj, Miguel de León Ceto, Francisco advocated for stronger action from the US government. Their visit comes at a time when Guatemala is spiraling into increasing lawlessness, abetted by the proponents of impunity for corruption and for crimes against humanity carried out during the internal armed conflict.

Francisco explained to us how his father worked long, back-breaking hours on coffee plantations, for very little pay. As Francisco put it, “They paid him less because he was Ixil.” But for Francisco’s father, neither poverty nor the long hours stood in the way of working for change. His father served as a leader in his community and advocated against the oppression of indigenous peoples in Guatemala. Francisco was just six years old when soldiers under the command of General Efraín Ríos Montt arrived in his community. Although he was only six, he knew his father would be a target and he was tragically correct. Many people in his village were targets. Soldiers committed a massacre. The only relative Francisco knew he had left was his four-year-old sister.

Both children were taken by soldiers to live at a military base. He spent the next six years—believed to have been orphaned—with his sibling in the base and later in a Catholic orphanage. He was eventually reunited with his mother, who had been organizing widows like herself in the countryside. Inspired by her struggle, Francisco got involved with others who had lost parents to the violence and began working to hold the perpetrators accountable.

Francisco spent years working with other war orphans and widows, collecting historical records and testimonies of the series of massacres that occurred in 1982 in the Ixil Triangle that would later be recognized as the Ixil genocide.

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Letter from the Directors

Dear Supporters,

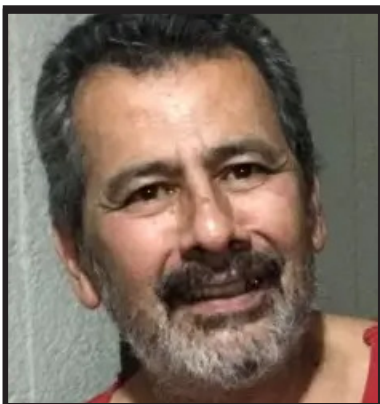
The first half of this year has been especially difficult for those on the front lines of the fight for justice, defending the environment, and advocating for human rights. Corrupt forces have launched attacks on multiple fronts to promote impunity and protect powerful interests. For human rights defenders and indigenous communities, the consequences have been devastating.

While institutions once dedicated to protecting human rights have slowly fallen to corrupt forces, defenders are increasingly vulnerable. At GHRC, we've tracked a rise in criminalization, arbitrary detention, and violent evictions in indigenous communities. But, like our partners in Guatemala, from whom we draw our inspiration, we are not backing down in the face of these threats. GHRC remains committed to supporting defenders in Guatemala and fighting to ensure the protection of human rights.

We've been very busy in the first half of 2022. As one of the few organizations with a team in both Guatemala and Washington, we play an important role in providing direct support to defenders at risk as well as elevating their demands internationally. To better respond to the increasing need for our support, we've added another staff member to our Guatemala team, Luis Gutierrez. We are excited to have him on board with us and you can read more about him below!

Corie Welch
Advocacy Director, DC Office

Isabel Solís
Director, Guatemala Office



GHRC Welcomes Luis

Luis Eduardo Gutiérrez Marckwordt has been involved in human rights in Guatemala for more than 40 years and has worked extensively with the digitization and analysis of data from the internal armed conflict. Recently, he worked in the Human Rights Prosecutor's Office in the Unit for Special Cases of the Internal Armed Conflict. He is excited to join GHRC in our Guatemala City Office.

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.

In Exile, Continuing the Fight

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Their effort culminated in the pivotal trial against Rios Montt in 2013. Francisco was the first witness to testify. “I started to feel the seriousness of the threats against me during the trial,” recalled Francisco. “There are a lot of people, powerful people in Guatemala that want to silence us, to deny us justice.” In spite of the threats, he continued organizing for justice in the Ixil territories, in both the genocide case and for socio-economic, cultural, and environmental rights, including the right to land and territory. But, he lived with a sense of constant danger. “The threats never went away but they became even worse,” he explained. “I knew in order to survive I needed to leave right away, but the hardest decision was whether or not to bring my family with me.” Francisco ultimately made the decision to travel overland toward the United States with just one other colleague. The father of six children, the youngest eight, he hasn’t seen his family in almost three years. In spite of the difficulty of being away from his family, he knows that he would not have wanted them to suffer as he did on the migrant trail. He told us, “All the hardships I faced in Guatemala, I faced on the journey to the US.”

Remain in Mexico program, known officially as the Migrant Protection Protocol. After 17 months in Mexico, they were finally allowed to enter the US, but were held in a border detention facility for 3 months. Francisco described the facility as “pure torture.”

His torment continues, but it is of a different type. Now in the final stages of his political asylum process, Francisco cannot leave the United States to visit his family. “The hardest part of all of this is being away from my family,” he noted. “Guatemala is my home,” he tells us. “If I had a choice, I would have never left the land of my ancestors, but if I wanted to live, I had to leave.”



Image via “El Buen Cristiano”

“There are a lot of people, powerful people, in Guatemala that want to silence us, to deny us justice.”

En route to the US Southern border, Francisco and his colleague were threatened by Mexican gang members. Mexican police, addressing them using racial slurs, robbed them in Juarez. “We didn’t know what to do. We wanted to report the crime to the police, but the police were the ones that committed the crime,” Francisco said. When they arrived at the border, they were forced to await their asylum proceedings in Ciudad Juarez, under the

Of the nearly 15 meetings we had during the speaking tour in Washington, DC, one was very different. The meeting was held in a lovely row house, where exiled Guatemalan prosecutors and judges greeted one another, hugged, commiserated, and strategized. Twenty-four Guatemalan judges and prosecutors have gone into exile in the last four years. Those at the meeting included former Attorney General Thelma Aldana, former Constitutional

Court President Gloria Porras, and former Special Prosecutor Juan Francisco Sandoval. They understood well the threats and fear Francisco described during the meeting. They also understood their relative privilege. Thelma Aldana, who received asylum in the US in 2020, put it this way: “I joined the diaspora of over 3 million Guatemalans in the United States; but unlike most of them, I was able to arrive by plane.”

Former head of the Special Prosecutor’s Office Against Impunity, Juan Francisco Sandoval, has lived in the Washington area since being forced to flee Guatemala last summer. For him, too, being separated from his family is

difficult, but with an added twist: they are being harassed and are potentially in danger. As he explained, “It’s hard knowing that my family is still there and is still a target. It’s extremely worrisome.” Judge Gloria Porras—who was blocked by the Guatemalan Congress from assuming her position as head of the Constitutional Court and

was forced to flee in 2021—echoed these sentiments. “Watching them drag my family into this is so painful. But if given the chance to do it over again, I would still choose to work on the side of justice. I think we all would.”

These brave Guatemalans, even from exile, continue their work. As Thelma Aldana put it, “We’re fighting for a better Guatemala, one where it is safe for us to return.” Francisco, too, remains committed to change. “I’m fighting for a better Guatemala, just like my father did. If at least one of my children joins the struggle, I will have succeeded.”



GHRC's Work

Here's a sample of what we've been up to in 2022.

January

Dear Colleague Letter

In response to a dangerous new law in Guatemala regulating the country's NGO's, GHRC worked with partners to get 18 members of Congress to write a letter to the Biden Administration expressing their concern. The law, which went into effect in February and gives Guatemala's executive branch discretionary powers to supervise and monitor NGO activities, including the power to dissolve NGOs that affect the "public order." The bicameral letter was led by Representatives Castro, Torres, and McGovern, and by Senator Markey.

Support for Sexual Violence Survivors

Our Guatemala team, led by Mayan lawyer Isabel Solís, accompanied Maya Achi women survivors of violence and their legal team as they pressed charges against five former civil patrollers accused of crimes against humanity and sexual violence. GHRC maintained a constant presence in the courtroom, signaling the importance the international community places on the case and providing support to the survivors. Our team documented trial proceedings and accompanied the Achi women and their legal team to and from the courtroom, past pro-immunity, pro-military supporters protesting outside. The Achi women won a historic victory: the five former civil patrollers were found guilty.



February

Accompaniment of Guatemalan Environmental Defender

In February, our Guatemala team accompanied Maya Chuj ancestral authority Julio Gomez to a court hearing where his freedom was at stake. Julio has been targeted by the Energy and Renovation Company for his opposition to a dam in the ancestral territories of Maya Chuj communities in San Mateo Ixtatan. Arrested in 2020 on spurious charges and then released with measures that required him to regularly report to the court, his freedom was threatened when the company filed a motion to force him back into pretrial detention. Isabel traveled five hours into the countryside to meet Julio and accompanied him to the courthouse in Huehuetenango, providing moral support and legal expertise. The hearing was suspended at the last minute. In 2019, Julio was abducted and tortured by supporters of the dam and has faced repeated harassment since then.

Urgent Action Campaign

In February, six prosecutors investigating high-level corruption were arrested on spurious charges. In response, we created international pressure through an urgent action campaign pushing for the prosecutors' release and for guarantees of their safety and of due process. With nearly 300 supporters sending letters, we ensured the Guatemalan ambassador was aware of the international outrage regarding the arrests. The charges against three of the prosecutors were eventually dropped, and two were released to house arrest. One, Virginia Laparra, remains imprisoned in conditions that threaten her safety.

March

NGO Sign-on Letter

As conditions worsened in Guatemala, our concern for the rights of Guatemala's indigenous defenders increased. Without an independent judiciary to ensure their rights, indigenous communities are ever more vulnerable to the illegal imposition of destructive, large-scale development and extractive projects in their territories. In March, joined by 17 other organizations, we sent a letter to the head of the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC), Nathan Scott, urging the DFC to revisit its investment plans in Guatemala and suspend all investments in rural and indigenous areas.

Accompaniment of Legal Team in Historic Trial

In March, our Guatemala team began accompanying attorneys with the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) who are helping to prosecute former military and police officers for disappearances and murders carried out during the internal armed conflict. Known as the Death Squad Dossier (or *Diario Militar*) case, it is one of the best-documented cases in Guatemalan history, as the murders and abductions were recorded in military intelligence logs. The CALDH attorneys have faced increasing threats as the trial of nine former police and military officers continues. In addition to observing all of the hearings and documenting the proceedings, we have been accompanying the legal team to and from hearings and to other meetings. We also helped one of the threatened attorneys set up a much-needed home security system.

Pressured the Police

When Julio Tecu, the son of an environmental defender in El Estor, Izabal was arrested in March, our Guatemala team contacted local police, demanding that they release information on his whereabouts and ensure his safety while he was in their custody. This pressure was effective. He was released!

April

Meeting with the Development Finance Corporation

GHRC's March letter received press coverage from major Guatemalan news outlets. As a result of the letter, joined by several other groups, we met with eight top DFC officials, who told us the DFC's publicly announced plan to finance the expansion of a banana plantation had been canceled.



May

Emergency Response

In May, when environmental rights defender Adela Choc was being held hostage by pro-mining forces in El Estor, Izabal, and threatened with being burned alive, our Guatemala team pressured the National Civil Police to respond and ensure her safety. We then found and helped finance temporary, safe housing for her and her family.



Speaking Tour

GHRC hosted Maya Ixil activists and human rights defenders Don Miguel de León Ceto and Francisco Chávez Raymundo in Washington, DC to raise awareness about the situation in Guatemalan indigenous communities and urge the US government to take stronger action in favor of human rights in Guatemala. During a packed week that included 15 meetings, GHRC staff and the two defenders brought policymakers, State Department officials, and NGO partners detailed news on the escalating attacks on human rights defenders, including increasing criminalization of indigenous rights defenders. Stressing the link between corruption, poverty, violence, and migration they asked that the United States support locally focused, indigenous-led development. They also called for an expedited and more accessible political asylum process. GHRC also organized a webinar and a DC gathering for our activist base to connect with the defenders.



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