



GHRC Remembers Sister Alice Zachmann

In April, GHRC's founder and long-time director, Alice Zachmann died at the age of 100. She set an example of love, courage, and service for all whose lives she touched.

Alice was born in 1926 in the German-speaking farming community of St. Michael, Minnesota. After graduating from high school, Alice decided to join the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), a teaching order of nuns. She taught first grade and other grades for many years in St. Paul, MN, and then served as a school principal. The SSNDs had a mission in Guatemala, and Alice went to visit the sisters there. In 1982, after Alice had expressed interest in becoming a missionary in Guatemala, 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 asked for a small room at Catholic University and founded GHRC. GHRC began leading fact-finding missions, disseminating weekly reports on human rights violations, leading speaking tours for Guatemalan activists, organizing educational events, and supporting Guatemalans who were fleeing into exile.



(Continued on p. 3)

-- Also in this issue --

Letter from the GHRC Team.....p. 2

Amplifying Voices.....p. 6

Thirty Years in Search of Justice.....p. 4, 5

Prospects for Change.....p. 7

GHRC Mission

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.

Board of Directors

Pat Davis

President & Treasurer

Michael Seifert

Vice President

Gloria Jean Garland

Secretary

Carmen Valenzuela-Dall

Estephany Arreaga

Irene Izquieta

John Leary

Kelsey Alford-Jones

Staff

Verónica Serrano Tama

Outreach & Development Director

Miguel Ángel Gálvez Aguilar

Fellow

Juan Francisco Sandoval

Consultant

Interns

Madeleine Nemergut

Georgetown University

Leo Flanagan

University of Vermont

Mia Flaherty

Cornell University

Miles Kershner

Master's Student, UNC Chapel Hill

Letter from the GHRC Team

Dear Friends,

The recent renewal of key leadership within the justice system, particularly the appointment of a new Attorney General, has contributed to a less confrontational climate and opened the possibility for long-awaited institutional change. While it is still too early to assess the full scope of these developments, and significant challenges to the rule of law remain, encouraging signs are beginning to emerge—developments that deserve both support and close attention, particularly in the lead-up to the 2027 electoral process, as Guatemala seeks to strengthen democratic institutions and avoid the broader regional trend of democratic backsliding.

To raise awareness about this important possibility for change in Guatemala, this spring we organized two speaking tours in Washington. In March, we accompanied four women defenders during three days of advocacy meetings: anti-corruption prosecutors Siomara Sosa and Flor Gálvez, both in exile, and human rights defenders Sonia Acabal and Joseline Jácome updated congressional offices and the State Department on the importance of supporting fair selection processes for key positions, including new Constitutional Court magistrates. In May, we brought Paulo Estrada, Executive Director of the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), to Washington and were honored to confer on him the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defender Award. We ensured that thirteen congressional offices, as well as the State Department, heard Paolo's first-hand accounts of the danger human rights attorneys, prosecutors, and judges face as they press for justice in cases involving crimes against humanity and stressed the importance of justice for the victims and survivors of these crimes.

In April, we supported K'iche' Indigenous leader Lolita Chávez as she met with officials of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, highlighting the patterns of criminalization, surveillance, and violence faced by Indigenous rights advocates in Guatemala. With partner organizations, we requested a thematic hearing on the situation of Central American justice operators and human rights defenders who have been forced into exile. The Commission has granted the request, and the hearing will take place on August 4. GHRC will highlight the situation of Guatemalan justice operators and human rights defenders in exile and the continuing impact of criminalization and persecution on those who have been forced to leave the country for defending the rule of law.

Juan Francisco Sandoval, former head of the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity, joined our team in June. In addition to other work, he is developing reports on the extent to which essential aspects of the Peace Accords have been complied with and what the obstacles have been as Guatemala approaches the thirtieth anniversary of their signing.

We undertake our work in a spirit of humility and love, following in the footsteps of our founder, Sister Alice Zachmann, who died in April at the age of 100. Thank you for being part of our journey and for standing with us and with the Guatemalan people.

Verónica Serrano Tama

Miguel Ángel Gálvez Aguilar

Juan Francisco Sandoval

(Continued from p. 1)

Alice fought for the release of current board member Dr. Carmen Valenzuela, who was abducted, held, and tortured in Guatemala in 1990. Alice worked for the release of Sister Dianna Ortiz, mobilizing networks throughout the country to pressure for an end to the young US nun's secret detention and torture. Alice spoke truth to power on every occasion. She worked from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM, took a break for dinner, and returned to the office to work from 9:00 PM until midnight. This was her work schedule for two decades. She took no salary but lived on \$600 a month sent to her by her brother.



Sister Alice with Dianna Ortiz, Jennifer Harbury, Meredith Larson, Trish Ahern, and Paul Joslin, US citizens who were attacked or lost loved ones to state violence in Guatemala and who united for advocacy and mutual support through GHRC

“Alice spoke no Spanish, had no money to start an organization, and knew no one in DC. But she understood the need.”

After retiring in 2002, Alice continued to support GHRC, serving on the board and organizing demonstrations against torture, demonstrations for peace, and demonstrations of that at which she excelled—love.

Alice received nearly two dozen awards in her lifetime, including the Eleanor Roosevelt Award, the Louis B. Sohn Award, and the National Women's Alliance Award. She deserved many, many more.

As much as Alice would have wanted you to remember her and spread her love and sense of justice far and wide, she would want you to take action on behalf of human rights.



Veronica Serrano Tama and Pat Davis at Sister Alice's 100th birthday celebration

Thirty Years Later: Unfinished Justice

by Juan Francisco Sandoval Alfaro

This December marks thirty years since the signing of the Peace Accords. For many Guatemalans, that date signified the end of the internal armed conflict. For others, it represented the hope that the country would finally undertake the reforms needed to build a more solid democracy, stronger institutions, and a society grounded in respect for human rights. Three decades later, it is evident that peace succeeded in ending the armed conflict but failed to close the many institutional gaps that the Accords themselves identified as structural causes of exclusion, conflict, and democratic fragility.



The Peace Accords were never conceived solely as a political solution to the conflict. They were also a roadmap for transforming the State—a set of commitments made by Guatemala to its own society and to the international community. Their validity, therefore, does not depend on the ideological preferences of successive governments, nor can they be reduced to a mere annual commemoration.

One of the most significant undertakings of that process was the reform of the justice system. In September 1996, the parties signed the Agreement on the Strengthening of Civilian Power and the Role of the Army in a Democratic Society. In it, they acknowledged that one of the Guatemalan State's principal structural weaknesses lay in the justice administration system—plagued by slow proceedings, a lack of oversight, and the absence of modern mechanisms—circumstances that fostered corruption and impunity.

This was no minor assertion. The negotiators understood that peace would hardly be sustainable if the institutions responsible for administering justice remained weak, ineffective, or vulnerable to external pressures. The agreement, therefore, stipulated that the reform and modernization of the system must prevent it from generating or shielding impunity and corruption, and must guarantee impartiality, judicial independence, and equality before the law.

Thirty years on, that diagnosis remains disturbingly relevant. The failure to achieve a profound transformation of the justice system is not a problem confined to judges, prosecutors, or lawyers—its consequences are felt daily in the lives of millions of Guatemalans.

This is evident among indigenous and peasant communities that continue to face protracted conflicts over land and the recognition of their ancestral territories. The absence of accessible and effective justice has prolonged historical disputes and deepened distrust of state institutions.

It is also evident in the difficulty thousands of citizens face in obtaining timely responses to everyday problems. Judicial backlogs, procedural complexity, and unequal access to justice end up falling hardest, as is almost always the case, on those with the fewest resources.

Yet, one of the most alarming manifestations of institutional deterioration has been the weaponization of the criminal justice system against those who are inconvenient to those in power. In recent years, judges, prosecutors, journalists, Indigenous authorities, community leaders, human rights defenders, and other critical voices have faced investigations and legal proceedings widely questioned by national and international bodies. Exile—which many believed had been consigned to the most painful chapters of our history—has once again become a reality for dozens of people.

Beyond ideological differences and inevitable political controversies, it is difficult to argue that democracy is strengthened when those who investigate corruption, expose abuses, or practice independent journalism must count imprisonment or exile among the risks of their work.

Yet, perhaps the most serious consequence is something else entirely: the erosion of public trust. In courthouse corridors, in conversations among litigants, and in circles of lawyers, one hears all too often a phrase that should give us serious pause: that justice has a price.



The Guatemalan government and the URNG signing the Peace Accords

Thirty Years Later: Unfinished Justice (*continued*)

It does not matter whether that perception always aligns with reality. What is truly alarming is that it has become part of the common understanding held by many citizens. For when people cease to believe in the impartiality of their judges—when they come to view influence as outweighing the law and money as more powerful than legal statutes—one of the fundamental pillars of any democracy is weakened.

Paradoxically, many of the solutions to these problems were already envisaged thirty years ago. The Agreement on the Strengthening of Civilian Power called for the creation of a judicial career path based on open competitive examinations, the strengthening of training for judges and prosecutors, the modernization of the Judiciary and the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the establishment of transparent mechanisms for selecting magistrates on the basis of professional excellence.

To that end, the agreement also established a Commission for Strengthening the Justice System, tasked with promoting broad national debate and formulating recommendations for the system's transformation.

In 1998, that commission presented the report *A New Justice for Peace*—one of the most serious and ambitious exercises in reflection on the future of the Guatemalan justice system. Its recommendations addressed issues such as judicial independence, the professionalization of judges and prosecutors, the judicial career path, administrative modernization, and transparency in the selection of magistrates. A significant number of those proposals remain pending. Meanwhile, the country has developed a kind of cyclical ritual.



Juan Francisco Sandoval, Veronica Serrano Tama, Flor Gálvez, Siomara Sosa, Sonia Acabal, and Joseline Jácome

Whenever a second-tier election approaches, criticism regarding the functioning of the nominating commissions resurfaces. Undue influence is questioned, political pressure is denounced, and the fragility of the model is laid bare. Yet once the appointments are concluded, the reformist momentum fades, and the discussion is shelved once again.

Another such cycle has just concluded. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal and the Constitutional Court were constituted, and the Attorney General was appointed. As on previous occasions, the debates centered on names, alliances, and the balance of power.

The risk, once again, is that the country will fall back into the same dynamic: waiting five years only to discover once more that the shortcomings lie not merely with the individuals, but with the rules of the system.



GHRC intern Madeleine Nemergut, Flor Gálvez, Juan Francisco Sandoval, Sonia Acabal, Veronica Serrano Tama, Siomara Sosa, and Joseline Jácome

The thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the peace agreement offers an opportunity to break that vicious circle.

Perhaps now, following the conclusion of these indirect elections, there is room to revisit a discussion Guatemala has deferred for too long. Institutional reforms are never simple, nor do they yield immediate results, but postponing them indefinitely only guarantees a recurrence of the same crises.

Justice reform is not a narrow corporate demand. It concerns the legal certainty communities have over their lands and territories. It concerns the ability to dissent without fear. It concerns the protection of journalists and human rights defenders. It concerns the fight against corruption, legal certainty for investments, and citizens' trust in institutions. Ultimately, it has to do with the quality of our democracy.

Perhaps the best tribute Guatemala can pay to the Peace Accords lies not in organizing commemorative ceremonies or delivering solemn speeches, but in resuming the agenda of transformation the State committed itself to in 1996—an agenda that is still waiting to be fulfilled. For peace is not limited to the silencing of weapons.

Peace also means that no one is persecuted for thinking differently; that communities find institutional responses to their demands; that judges can make decisions independently; that citizens trust their courts; and that the law prevails over influences and interests.

Thirty years later, the question is no longer whether the Peace Accords remain in effect. The real question is whether Guatemala is finally willing to fulfill the part it still owes to its own history.

Amplifying Voices for Human Rights in Guatemala



Paulo Estrada - Representative of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Guatemala (FAMDEGUA) with Jennifer Harbury



Flor Galvez, Juan Francisco Sandoval, Veronica Serrano Tama, Siomara Sosa, Joseline Jacome, and Sonia Acabal on Capitol Hill



Veronica Serrano Tama, Paulo Estrada, and Pat Davis as Paulo receives the 2026 Alice Zachmann Defenders Award



Attendees of 2026 Alice Zachmann Defenders Award Ceremony



Jennifer Harbury giving remarks on the legacy of Sister Alice



Celebrating solidarity and fostering community with Guatemalan immigrants and exiles



Paulo Estrada and Veronica Serrano Tama during advocacy meetings in Congress in May



Paulo Estrada, Veronica Serrano Tama, Jennifer Harbury, Kit Gage, Pat Davis, and Juan Francisco Sandoval

Prospects for Change:

An Interview with Judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez

How do you see the current performance of the Constitutional Court?

It is still too early to offer a general opinion. But from the few rulings issued so far, it is already clear that the majority is dominant, a majority made up of corporatist groups that do not represent the people or answer to them. These groups put their own interests first, and those interests are not aligned with the broader population. As a result, we remain subject to the law of force rather than reason.

By corporatist groups, I refer to actors from the economic sector, military structures, and political figures who have turned justice into a matter of private interest. For that reason, civil society and the Guatemalan public have the important task of denouncing the conduct of magistrates so that what is right is rewarded and what is wrong is called out. These are decisive moments for the rule of law. If we do not move forward, we will continue to fall behind in building a justice system based on mutual respect and constitutional principles.

The Constitutional Court is currently influenced by a group of reelected magistrates who largely set the direction of its rulings. A clear example of the setbacks in transitional justice is the genocide case, which was annulled in 2024 after nearly a year of trial, precisely when a sentence was about to be issued, based on alleged conflicts of interest among some judges—a decision later upheld by the Constitutional Court. This reflects the broader regression in this area. Given that the same magistrates remain in place, I believe transitional justice will continue to stall or even regress further.

In many cases, justice stopped serving as a tool to protect legality and has instead become a selective mechanism of intimidation and criminalization against human rights defenders, international organizations, international courts, and especially the United Nations.

How do you assess the impact of the new attorney general on prospects for justice in Guatemala?

The election of the Attorney General, who heads the Public Prosecutor's Office, gives us hope that Guatemala may return to the path of strengthening the rule of law. In many cases, the concept of justice stopped serving as a tool to protect legality and has instead become a selective mechanism of intimidation and criminalization against human rights defenders, international organizations, international courts, and especially the United Nations. It has also been used against justice operators, indigenous communities, journalists, and activists who defend access to justice, land, territory, natural resources, freedom of expression, and the right to public information. This is a moment to reflect and to remind the newly elected officials in the justice sector that these positions are not spoils to be divided. They must not take advantage of the chaotic state of the justice system, where the honest are mixed with the dishonest, and where it often seems that one must pay for a case to move forward. This is especially true within the Public Prosecutor's Office.

The new leadership of the Public Prosecutor's Office suggests a strengthening of investigative work. Recent institutional changes, such as the removal of key figures linked to past abuses, the restructuring of FECCI, and new limits on the public disclosure of cases, are encouraging developments that are likely to continue.

At the same time, urgent action is needed to dismiss baseless or arbitrary cases and address the situation of people who remain in prolonged or unlawful pretrial detention. Courts should be asked to apply house arrest rather than detention where appropriate, especially in cases where detention has exceeded legal limits or appears disproportionate. Cases such as those involving 48 Cantones and Stuardo Campos illustrate a broader pattern of procedural prolongation and repeated filings that effectively keep individuals in custody across successive proceedings. These cases should be a priority for the Attorney General, given the clear signs of procedural abuse and manipulation of criminal law.



**GUATEMALA HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSION**

3321 12th St NE
Washington, DC 20017
Tel: (202) 998-2191 | www.ghrc-usa.org

FIRST-CLASS MAIL

U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
MERRIFIELD, VA
PERMIT No: 1447

Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA

3321 12th St NE Washington, DC | (202) 998-2191 | ghrc-usa@ghrc-usa.org

**PLEASE TAKE THE
TIME TO SUPPORT
OUR WORK!**

Donate via our website
WWW.GHRC-USA.ORG



Donate by sending a check to our office
3321 12th St NE
Washington, DC, 20017