El Quetzal | Fall 2026 Issue #30

PUBLISHED BY THE GUATEMALA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION/USA

Deadly Attacks and Unanswered Questions

The assassination of anti-corruption lawyer Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa and the killing of eight people in Huité, Zacapa, raise serious questions about justice in Guatemala. Although no connection between the crimes has been established, both expose concerns about security forces, investigations, and accountability.

On October 17, gunmen shot Foppa more than twenty times at Campo Marte in Guatemala City, as he played his regular Saturday morning soccer game. His young son witnessed the attack. Gustavo Adolfo Aguilar Gamarro was also killed, and four other people were reportedly injured.

The investigation quickly became controversial. Seven police officers were subsequently arrested following the detention of two Indigenous brothers, Daniel and Rigoberto Choc Toz. Police claimed to have discovered weapons in the brothers' delivery equipment, but the brothers alleged that officers had planted the evidence. Both were released for lack of evidence.

These events raise a fundamental question: how can the public trust an investigation when the actions of officers involved in its earliest stages are themselves under investigation? The reported involvement of the FBI and the October 31 police raids may help establish the facts, but neither guarantees an independent, transparent investigation capable of identifying both the perpetrators and those who ordered the killing.

Foppa's assassination carries implications beyond the loss of a prominent lawyer. A former Public Ministry prosecutor who contributed to major corruption investigations, including La Línea.

He headed Guatemala's Tax Administration Superintendency from 2016 to 2018, challenging powerful interests and speaking out against corruption and organized crime.

Foppa had received police protection since 2010, reinforced in 2025. Yet the circumstances of his murder exposed questions about how that protection was implemented. According to Interior Minister Marco Antonio Villeda, the officers assigned to him were watching his son nearby when the gunmen attacked.

The central issue is not simply whether Foppa had security measures on paper, but whether those measures were adequate, properly implemented, and capable of responding to foreseeable threats. The subsequent dismissal of National Civil Police director David Custodio Boteo and deputy director Esvin Jacinto Quiché underscored concerns about institutional responsibility. His murder also sends a disturbing message to those who investigate corruption or publicly challenge powerful interests: formal protection cannot guarantee safety without effective institutions and accountability.

Foppa had publicly accused political figures and organizations, including Zury Ríos, Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, the Foundation Against Terrorism, and CACIF, of contributing to his persecution and criminalization. He linked his 2023 arrest, while working with journalist José Rubén Zamora's legal team, to retaliation for his anti-corruption work. While these allegations do not establish responsibility for his murder, they deserve investigation.



People attend the public tribute and funeral of former prosecutor Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa in Guatemala City, October 20, 2026. Photos by REUTERS/Cristina Chiquin.

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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.

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Letter from the GHRC Team

Dear Friends,

As Guatemala approaches the thirtieth anniversary of the Peace Accords and prepares for the 2027 elections, the human rights situation is still alarming. The new Attorney General has opened opportunities to address impunity and political persecution, but violence and the criminalization of defenders continue. Since September 27, armed commandos in military attire have killed thirteen people in the department of Zacapa. In the past few months, with your support, we have continued to amplify the voices of human rights defenders through advocacy in Washington, including before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

In July, we hosted a webinar, "The Future of Democracy," on the challenges facing the University of San Carlos, whose leadership has been co-opted, and the university's role in protecting democracy. Panelists included Raúl Molina, Vice-president of the Guatemala Peace and Development Network; former Human Rights Ombudsman Jordán Rodas; and Jennifer de la Cruz, a student at the university. We also began a series of reports on the Peace Accords, which we will release to mark the 30th anniversary of the Peace Accords in December.

We took part in an IACHR hearing in August on justice operators and human rights defenders forced into exile, which we had requested with partner organizations. There, we called for conditions that would allow them a safe and dignified return. GHRC also sponsored a trip to Washington for K'iche' leader and land defender Lolita Chávez so that she could testify before the IACHR about the threats she has received since returning from exile in 2024, including from an individual linked to the National Civil Police. GHRC helped Lolita obtain protective measures from the IACHR and is supporting her efforts to keep them in place. In September the IACHR submitted the case of fourteen Q'eqchi' communities in the Polochic Valley to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. GHRC was among the original petitioners in 2011, and we will continue to accompany the communities as the case moves forward.

In October, former prosecutor Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa was murdered, along with Gustavo Aguilar Gamarro, and GHRC issued an urgent action calling for a thorough, independent, and credible investigation. We are also following the violence in Zacapa, where on September 27 men in military attire killed eight residents of Huité, including two women and a child. President Arévalo has confirmed that army units took part. Another massacre took place in Zacapa on November 13, again at the hands of an armed commando dressed as soldiers. As in Huité, they were reportedly looking for a man linked to drug trafficking.

In November, we met with nine congressional offices. We urged them to press for an independent investigation of Solórzano Foppa's murder, to seek answers about the use of US-provided equipment in Huité, to clarify the extent of US military cooperation with the Guatemalan army in anti narcotics operations, and to call for implementation of Guatemala's long-promised policy to protect human rights defenders. That protection will matter even more as the 2027 elections approach, when attacks on defenders usually rise.

We continue this work as a grassroots solidarity organization, following in the footsteps of our founder, Sister Alice Zachmann. Our work to protect human rights in Guatemala is more critical than ever. Thank you for your continued support.

In solidarity,





Verónica Serrano Tama Juan Francisco Sandoval

(Continued from p. 1)

The broader question is whether Guatemala can protect people who challenge entrenched interests and investigate crimes against them without political interference. GHRC has called for the preservation of surveillance footage, communications, and forensic evidence, protection for witnesses and relatives, and an independent investigation that establishes responsibility wherever the evidence leads.

Commandos Carry Out Two Massacres in the Department of Zacapa

In two separate incidents, in a span of less than two months, armed commandos dressed in military attire opened fire on residents in the department of Zacapa. On September 27, a commando killed eight people in Huité, Zacapa, including a 14-year-old boy. Reports suggested a possible military operation targeting alleged drug trafficker Haroldo Lorenzana. Authorities initially denied conducting a military operation and continue to insist that soldiers already in the area approached the outskirts of Huité only when they heard gunfire. President Bernardo Arévalo, however, later acknowledged army participation. Defense Minister Henry Sáenz made 107 soldiers available to investigators.

During an October 12 congressional hearing in Guatemala, former police director David Custodio Boteo said police officers withdrew after being told that a military operation was underway. The conflicting accounts raise questions about who authorized the deployment, how force was used, and who bears responsibility for the civilian deaths.

> **Both US Congress and Guatemalan authorities must thoroughly investigate the use of US-supplied J-8 Jeeps and potentially other US-provided equipment in Huité on the night of the massacre, as well as allegations that US forces may have been involved.**



Residents recorded the armed incident and documented the event on social media.. Photo by epInvestiga/Social Media.

Possible foreign involvement also requires clarification. Despite increased US-Guatemala counternarcotics cooperation, President Arévalo maintains that he has not authorized foreign military operations in Guatemala. The New York Times, however, has reported that Guatemala has agreed to joint counter-narcotics operations with the US military.



Residents of Huite placed photos of the victims at the municipality entrance on November 9, 2026. Photo by Villa Nueva News gt.

Videos show US-supplied J-8 military vehicles in Huité on the night of the massacre. Defense Minister Sáenz confirmed they belonged to the Army but denied they were in the area where the killings occurred. Their presence, given the Army's past misuse of these counternarcotics vehicles, underscores the need for stronger US oversight.

On October 16, a day before his murder, Foppa suggested the Huité killings involved a CIA operation targeting Lorenzana. Citing helicopter use, he suggested the operation aimed to destabilize the government ahead of the 2027 elections. His unverified hypothesis warrants investigation.

The November 13 kidnapping by an armed commando in military attire of a young man in the municipality of Zacapa likewise requires clarification. The commando raided the home of Keneth Pacheco, handcuffed him, and forced him into a vehicle. They opened fire on a car in which his mother, two brothers, and a friend were traveling to follow them, killing all four. Another man, who was riding a motorcycle, was also shot to death. They fired on a police car. When the commando realized they had the wrong man, they released Pacheco. According to media reports, the commando was looking for Raul Archila, who is reportedly linked to Haroldo Lorenzana. Pacheco's father said the men in the commando were "gringos." He said he heard them speaking English.

Credible, independent investigations are essential to establish the facts, identify those responsible, and ensure accountability. Without justice, impunity will continue to undermine public trust, weaken democratic institutions, and endanger all Guatemalans.

GHRC in Action: Advocacy Highlights







In November, GHRC urged members of the U.S. Congress to press for a credible investigation into the assassination of anti-corruption lawyer Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa and seek accountability for the killings of eight civilians in Huité and five people in a subsequent armed operation in Zacapa.







IACHR Hearing on Forced Exile

At an IACHR hearing on forced exile and its consequences, we documented the increasing use of forced exile as a tool of political repression. We stressed that exile is often the consequence of persecution and criminalization, rather than a choice.

Documentary on Guatemalans in Exile

During the summer, with the Due Process of Law Foundation and Voices of Guatemalans in Exile, we organized a screening of Sergio Tarín's *Between Nostalgia and Hope*, which follows the experiences of exiled Guatemalans in Valencia, Spain.

Webinar: The Future of Democracy

In our July webinar, panelists examined the growing challenges facing the University of San Carlos, whose leadership has been co-opted, and the role of the university in protecting democracy and human rights in Guatemala.

GHRC Brings Indigenous Leader Lolita Chávez to IACHR



Lolita Chávez, Verónica Serrano Tama and GHRC intern Leo Flanagan

In August, GHRC sponsored a trip to Washington for Indigenous K'iche' leader and land defender Lolita Chávez so that she could testify before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on threats she has received since returning from exile in 2024. She has suffered acts of intimidation that have not been investigated by Guatemala's Public Ministry and has also received threats from an individual linked to the National Civil Police. GHRC has helped Lolita obtain protective measures from the IACHR and supports Lolita in her efforts to keep these measures in place.



Lolita Chávez and Verónica Serrano Tama

Understanding Gender-Based Violence in Guatemala: Historical Roots and Ongoing Challenges

By Mia Flaherty, GHRC Summer Intern

On July 27, 2005, Cristina Hernandez, a 20-year-old college student, was abducted outside her home in San Juan, Guatemala, by four men. Her neighbors called her father, who attempted to track down the kidnappers with his own car. He went to the police and begged them to help, but they refused, claiming that "many young girls run off with their boyfriends" and that no search could be started for 24 hours. The next day, Cristina was found, having been shot four times and bitten all over. No forensic examination or evidence collection was conducted. When the family tried to give the Public Ministry her clothes as evidence, they reportedly told them to throw them away.



REDNOVI anti-femicide banner. Photo by Karen Eliot.

Although some reforms have been made in the past two decades aimed at guaranteeing women's rights and combatting gender-based violence, Guatemala continues to have one of the world's highest rates of gender-based violence. In fact, Guatemala has the ninth-highest rate of femicide in the world. Femicide is defined as the murder of women due to the fact that they are women. In Guatemala, out of 100,000 women, 6.7 women were victims of femicide in 2026.

Gender-based violence frequently takes the form of domestic and intimate partner violence and human trafficking. The risk of gender-based violence is higher for women who have married as adolescents. According to the World Bank, Guatemala has high rates of teenage marriage, at 28 percent. This is slightly higher than the Latin America average of 25 percent and much higher than in other regions, such as the Caribbean and the Middle East and North Africa.


Photographs of women murdered in Guatemala published in a daily newspaper © BBC This World

Another factor leading to these high rates is the legacy of violence from Guatemala's internal armed conflict, which lasted for 36 years, only ending in 1996. According to David Casey and M. Gabriela Torres, researchers at the University of Southern Maine and Wheaton College respectively, during the height of the terror and violence of the war, rape and sexual violence were used by the state as tools to control the population. They explain that women were frequently painted as subversives, who were particularly dangerous due to their unique ability to corrupt the younger generations because of their roles as caregivers. The government used sexual violence and excessive physical violence to harm local communities, particularly Indigenous ones. Women were raped in front of their families and communities, and their bodies were placed on display as omens of impending massacres. Indigenous women were attacked and raped at twice the rate of other women.

One of the main reasons that Guatemala has such a high rate of gender-based violence is its culture of impunity. The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala has documented an impunity rate of 99 percent for cases of violence against women. The judicial system does not take cases of gender-based violence seriously, and there is significant corruption, leading to most cases being dismissed. This high rate of impunity, combined frequently with a lack of resources and with feelings of fear and shame on the part of those who suffer the violence, leads to low rates of reporting for these crimes.

Laws criminalizing rape and marital rape have been passed, as well as a law targeting femicide and violence against women. Guatemala has even established specialized investigation and prosecution units for crimes against women. Police, however, have little training on how to investigate crimes against women or assist the victims. The authorities frequently fail to respond to calls for help because they believe that violence against women is a man's right.

Without a change in the culture of impunity that exists within Guatemala, any legal reforms the government takes on to protect women will be limited in their effect because the laws will not be properly enforced. New strategies for combating gender-based violence need to be conceptualized in Guatemala, and a new blueprint needs to be drawn that results in true change for women. Otherwise, the most vulnerable women will continue to view gender-based violence as just another condition of existence.

Mia Flaherty is a political science and government student at Cornell University. Her unabridged article can be found on our website.

Guatemala's Security Debate: Justice, Business Interests, and the 2027 Elections

By Juan Francisco Sandoval, GHRC Consultant

Security Demands and Institutional Accountability

At Guatemala's National Business Conference (ENADE), held on October 8, representatives of the business sector called on President Bernardo Arévalo's administration to take stronger action against crime, extortion, and drug trafficking. Business organizations, including the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (CACIF) and the Foundation for the Development of Guatemala (FUNDESA), emphasized the need to strengthen security institutions, regain control of prisons, and prevent organized crime from influencing the 2027 general elections.

These concerns reflect genuine security challenges facing Guatemala. However, the discussion placed considerable responsibility on the Arévalo administration while paying less attention to the institutions responsible for investigating and prosecuting criminal activity. Public security cannot be separated from the independence of the Public Prosecutor's Office, the effectiveness of criminal investigations, and the ability of courts to hold powerful actors accountable.



At a press conference, Commissioner Iván Velásquez Gómez, Attorney General Thelma Aldana Hernández, and the Superintendent of Tax Administration (SAT), Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa provided updates on the case "impunity and fraud: a corruption network in the SAT", May 06, 2016. Photo by CICIG.

The discussion of security also raises important questions about the business sector's historical relationship with anti-corruption efforts. For years, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), working alongside national prosecutors, investigated corruption networks that had penetrated state institutions and established connections with influential political and economic actors.

Yet when some investigations reached members of Guatemala's economic elite, sectors that had initially supported CICIG began questioning its work and backed efforts to dismantle the mechanisms established to combat impunity. This history deserves attention when business organizations now demand stronger institutions capable of confronting organized crime.

Strengthening police forces and expanding security operations will have limited impact if criminal investigations remain ineffective, judicial independence is undermined, or prosecution is used for political purposes. The challenge is not simply to increase security resources but to ensure that the institutions responsible for administering justice operate independently and serve the public interest.

Electoral Risks and the Unfinished Peace Agenda

One of the central concerns raised at ENADE was the possibility that organized crime and drug trafficking networks could finance political campaigns during Guatemala's 2027 elections. Former Colombian President Iván Duque, who attended the event, also warned about the threats that criminal organizations pose to democratic institutions.



Election officials count marked ballots after polling stations closed during general elections in Guatemala City, Sunday, Aug. 11, 2019. © AP Photo/Oliver de Ros

These risks deserve serious attention. Guatemala has experienced the consequences of illicit political financing and corruption. However, allegations of criminal influence must be investigated impartially and must not become instruments for discrediting emerging political movements, Indigenous leaders, or opposition candidates without sufficient evidence. Protecting elections requires both accountability and respect for democratic participation.

Beyond preventing criminal interference, ensuring the participation of all citizens in the 2027 general elections, especially Indigenous leaders, is critical. This is particularly significant as Guatemala approaches the 30th anniversary of the Peace Accords, signed in December 1996, which established commitments to protect Indigenous peoples' rights, including their full participation in political and public life. Upholding these commitments is essential to strengthening Guatemala's democracy.

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The possibility of expanded US security and military cooperation adds another dimension to the discussion. International assistance can help combat drug trafficking, money laundering, and transnational criminal networks, but it must include effective oversight and safeguards against human rights violations. Strengthening security should not undermine the civilian institutions and democratic principles established after the armed conflict.

As the 2027 elections approach, Guatemala must confront organized crime without allowing security measures to be used to intimidate political opponents or restrict democratic participation. Independent justice institutions, equal accountability, and respect for democratic rights are essential. Guatemala needs security, but lasting security cannot exist without justice.

Thirty Years After Guatemala's Peace Accords: The Unfinished Promise of Social Justice



The Government of Guatemala and the Guatemala National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) signed the "firm and lasting peace agreement," on December 29, 1996.

Thirty years after Guatemala's Peace Accords, the structural inequalities that contributed to the armed conflict remain deeply rooted. The 1996 Agreement on Socioeconomic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation promised greater access to land, stronger public institutions, and increased investment in health, education, housing, and rural development.

A report prepared by GHRC, covering 1996–2026, identifies important advances in literacy, maternal health, basic services, and institution-building. Yet these improvements have not substantially reduced poverty. In 2023, 56% of Guatemalans lived in poverty, including 75.3% of Indigenous people and 66.4% of rural residents.

Land rights remain a critical unresolved issue. Guatemala still lacks specialized agrarian courts and comprehensive rural development legislation, while Indigenous and campesino communities continue to face evictions and criminalization linked to land disputes. The 2020 elimination of specialized peace and agrarian institutions further complicated efforts to address these conflicts. Three decades later, fulfilling the Peace Accords requires more than institutional reforms. It demands sustained political commitment, adequate resources, and tangible improvements in the rights and living conditions of historically excluded communities.

Inter-American Commission Sends Polochic Valley Case to the Inter-American Court

On September 17, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights submitted to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights a case concerning human rights violations against Indigenous communities in Guatemala's Polochic Valley. GHRC was among the original petitioners in March 2011, following forced evictions, deaths, arbitrary detentions, and destruction of property affecting these communities. The petitioners have sought reparations, including compensation for damages; access to food, water, and housing; consultation with affected communities; collective land titles for the 14 Indigenous Q'eqchi' communities; safe return to their territories; investigations into acts of violence; and guarantees of non-repetition and respect for ancestral rights. A hearing date before the Court has not yet been set, but the case's advancement represents an important step toward justice and accountability for the affected communities.

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