GUATEMALA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION/USA
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Dear Friend,

Events of the past month in Guatemala have been shocking. Anti-corruption lawyer Juan Francisco Foppa was assassinated during his regular Saturday morning soccer game by two gunmen who fled on a motorcycle. An operation in Huité, Zacapa, that analysts speculate involved the US Drug Enforcement Agency left eight residents dead, including three women and a fourteen-year-old boy. The Guatemalan military was also present–investigations into the extent of their involvement in the massacre is underway–and used equipment provided by the United States, including J-8 Jeeps. A community journalist in Huehuetenango was gunned down, and journalist José Rubén Zamora reported death threats against his son.

On the positive side, the Constitutional Court confirmed Zamora's release from prison, and police and prosecutors carried out a raid to determine whether student protesters' academic records had been deleted at the University of San Carlos. Please read on below for more details. And if you can, please support our work!

Please find this story and more below.

Human Rights Violations

- **Anti-Corruption Lawyer Juan Francisco Foppa Assassinated**

On the morning of October 17, gunmen murdered Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa, a prominent Guatemalan lawyer who had devoted much of his career to fighting corruption and organized crime. He was shot more than twenty times at Campo Marte, a sports complex in Guatemala City where he regularly played soccer on Saturday mornings. His young son witnessed his father's murder. Another man, Gustavo Adolfo Aguilar Gamarro, was also killed, and four others were injured.

False arrests made within two hours of the murders have led to the arrest of 7 police officers and the firing of top commanders. Two Indigenous men, brothers Daniel and Rigoberto Choc Toz, were arrested shortly after the murder took place. The men worked as food deliverers and were riding a motorcycle, as witnesses said the assassins were, and one of the brothers was wearing a Barcelona jersey, which witnesses said one of the gunmen wore. The brothers said police stopped

them once, checked their documents and searched them, and then let them go but stopped them again a few minutes later and claimed to have found a carbine rifle in the food delivery pouch, as well as a magazine, 9-millimeter ammunition, and a tactical vest. The brothers also said the police asked them for money. The men were held until October 18 before being released for lack of evidence. The proceedings were kept confidential but sources cited in Guatemalan press reports maintain police officers involved in the search had planted the evidence on the men, and Guatemalan media reported that the weapon allegedly found in the pouch was determined to be different from the gun used in the crime. An investigation into the police officers is underway, and seven have been arrested. The FBI is now reportedly assisting in the investigation.

Foppa was known for exposing corruption, including shedding light on links between corrupt politicians, former military officers, and drug trafficking gangs. He had worked as a Public Ministry prosecutor, leading intelligence efforts in high-profile investigations, including key expert testimony in the "La Línea" case that forced President Otto Pérez Molina to resign in 2015. He had also been director of the Superintendency of Tax Administration from 2016 to 2018 and was an outspoken analyst of current events.

Foppa had a protection plan involving National Civil Police officers who functioned as his security guards. The plan was created in 2010, when he worked in the Public Prosecutor's Office and was investigating criminal structures. His security plan was reinforced in 2025 because of his political profile. According to Interior Minister Marco Antonio Villeda, the day of his murder, Foppa had reportedly asked the security guards to watch his son, who was some 40 yards away on the sidelines. According to the former General Director of the National Civil Police, David Custodio Boteo, one of the agents said he pursued the assassins and fired his weapon, but didn't manage to hit or stop the gunmen. Interior Minister Villeda fired Boteo and subdirector Esvin Jacinto Quiché on October 27th.

On October 31, Guatemalan police carried out 16 raids in the municipalities of Guatemala, Mixco and Amatitlán in an effort to find motorcycles linked to the killing but have reported no progress.

Foppa had clear enemies. In a social media post, he stated that politician Zury Rios and Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, the head of the Foundation Against Terrorism, were behind his 2023 arrest when he was a member of journalist José Rubén Zamora's legal team, and that they, together with CACIF–Guatemala's powerful business lobby–and municipal leaders had prevented his mayoral candidacy. He stated that CACIF financed the Foundation Against Terrorism, which he linked to drug trafficking, and suggested that his arrest was in retaliation for his work when he headed the Tax Superintendency, requiring the country's largest tax evaders to pay their share. Foppa's work investigating criminal organizations in Guatemala while he was in the Public Ministry led to a prison sentence for Barrio 18's top leader, Aldo Dupie Ochoa Mejía. Foppa headed the Criminal

Investigations Directorate within the Public Ministry (also known as the Public Prosecutor's Office).

An outspoken analyst of current events, Foppa regularly posted videos giving on the political and social situation in Guatemala. His posts included analyses linking powerful politicians with drug trafficking networks. In his most recent post, on October 16th, he hypothesized that the September massacre in Huité, Zacapa, in which eight people were killed by masked gunmen, was a CIA operation. The operation, he said, was an attempt to capture Haroldo Lorenzana Terrazo, for whom the United States has offered a $5 million reward and who the US believes is linked to the Mexican Sinaloa cartel. Explaining this theory, he cited air support for the operation, which consisted of two helicopters. The Guatemalan army initially denied being involved. The Guatemalan government has not revealed the extent of the Guatemalan army's involvement, but key officers have been fired, and more than a hundred soldiers are being investigated. Foppa speculated that the point of the failed operation was to generate fear and chaos, with a view to the 2027 general election.

Social media posts since the murder reflect politically expedient messaging around Foppa's killing. Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, who heads the Foundation Against Terrorism and who has been internationally sanctioned for undermining the rule of law, posted on X, "Under the current administration, levels of violence are being experienced that haven't been seen in decades." This accusation notwithstanding, the actual homicide rate is trending downward and the overall crime index is falling.

The day of Foppa's murder, an account on X known as Yes, Master!, which is associated with former Public Ministry officials and with Méndez Ruiz, posted a photo of Foppa and a message: "He's on his way to the Little Beach" (Con rumbo a La Playita). To this message was added a hashtag: #Onfire. The account has used this hashtag repeatedly to hail actions such as arrest and exile of anti-corruption prosecutors and judges, sometimes in advance of the events. Accounts reposting the message state that the account published the message hours before Foppa's murder. The message was deleted hours after it was posted.

GHRC issued an Urgent Action Alert calling for the preservation of surveillance footage, communications, ballistics evidence, and other relevant records; for lines of investigation to be pursued that relate to Foppa's work, statements he had made, and threats he had received; and for protection to be provided to Foppa's family members and to witnesses. Take action here.

- **Journalist Murdered in Huehuetenango**

On October 2, at around 9:00 in the evening, community journalist Evelio Lisandro López Sánchez was shot to death as he returned to his home in San Pedro Necta, Huehuetenango.

According to reports, he was intercepted by a gunman in a car who blocked his way and opened fire, shooting him eleven times. An Indigenous Mayan Mam reporter, columnist, and sports commentator, López was founder and director of the Facebook page Huehue Es Noticias HNT2 and was actively involved in the Huehuetengo Press Association (APEHUE). Days before his murder, according to reports, he had publicly denounced a series of threats related to his journalistic work, and a colleague said López had received telephone threats for years that he believed were connected to political actors. Although López reported the threats, the threats were never investigated.

Representatives of the Public Ministry arrived at the crime scene the following afternoon, a delay the APEHUE criticized as potentially affecting the preservation of the crime scene and the gathering of evidence. The murder sparked protests in San Pedro Necta, with residents burning the house and vehicle of a suspected killer, as well as setting fire to a police substation. The man residents hold responsible for López's murder works for the municipal government, has not been publicly named, and has already turned himself in.

Estefany Martínez, the president of APEHUE, indicated that the organization had filed a complaint with the specialized prosecutor's office for crimes against journalists. She has also advocated for protection for journalists in the region. The United States Embassy in Guatemala called for the murder to be clarified, stating, "A free society needs a press that reports without threats, without fear and without self-censorship."

Four days after the murder, President Arévalo vowed to finalize and publish before the end of the year a long-awaited plan to protect journalists. Guatemala ranks 128th out of 180 countries in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders. The killing of Evelio Lisandro López is part of a broader pattern of violence against journalists in Guatemala and marks the second killing of a journalist in 2026. On April 26, journalist Carlos Humberto Cal Ical was murdered in San Cristóbal Verapaz, Alta Verapaz.

- **Eight Killed in Possible Operation to Capture Cartel Leader**

Gunfire in Huité, Zacapa, on September 27 left eight people dead, as unidentified men dressed in military-style attire moved through the town and shot residents. The eight victims were identified as Vilma Elizabeth Paz Paiz, Cinthia Gabriela, Uve Lisbeth Paz Paiz, Juan Carlos Pedroza Agustín, Mario René Romero Díaz, Carlos Donato Paiz Mateo, Ludwin Estuardo Nájera, and a 14-year-old boy, Denis Alonzo Herrera. According to reports, the massacre may have been part of an attempt to capture Haroldo Lorenzana, an accused drug trafficker with links to Mexican criminal organizations, including the Sinaloa Cartel.

Guatemalan officials in the defense and interior ministries denied running any operation; military units were in the area, the Defense Ministry maintains, but refrained from approaching to avoid

escalating the situation that, it said, was a conflict between two drug trafficking groups. President Arévalo days after the incident stated that army units had, in fact, participated, and Defense Minister Henry Sáenz turned 107 soldiers from the Second Infantry Brigade of Zacapa over to investigators. He said units had been in the area to install road checkpoints when they became aware of reports of gunfire, and they arrived near the scene and fired warning shots. Huité Mayor Leonel Paz Lopez told the Guatemalan news source *La Hora* that the incident was "an intervention by a commando that entered the premises with excessive use of force." The Public Prosecutor's Office is currently conducting a criminal investigation to determine who fired the shots and why. Opposition politicians and analysts within civil society have speculated that the United States Drug Enforcement Agency was involved. In years past, including in 2009 and 2010, armed and masked men the Guatemalan press identified as DEA did carry out operations in Huité.

Called before the Guatemalan Congress on October 12, Interior Ministry, National Civil Police, and Defense Ministry officials gave little information that clarified the situation. The Defense Ministry continued to maintain that soldiers went to the site of the confrontation, not to carry out a military operation, but because they became aware that armed groups were exchanging gunfire. Former General Director of the National Civil Police, David Custodio Boteo, stated that police units arrived after receiving a report of gunfire and retired after being told there was a military operation in the area.

J-8 Jeeps, provided by the United States, were used by the military in Huité. Time-stamped videos show J-8 Jeeps in Huité at the time of the gunfire. Videos posted online also show several J-8 jeeps leaving the urban center of Huité several hours after the gunfire was first reported. Defense Minister Sáenz, according to *Prensa Libre*, admitted that three or four J-8 jeeps and several pickup trucks of soldiers of the Second Infantry Brigade appear in videos posted online. One jeep reportedly was recorded near where a woman who had been shot and killed lay. Minister of Defense Sáenz maintained that the jeep was not in the urban center. The United States provided 134 J-8 jeeps to the Guatemalan army in 2013, and on two occasions international organizations have flagged their misuse. The US Government Accountability Office confirms their misuse.

The New York Times reported last May that Guatemala had agreed to conduct joint strikes with the US military against drug traffickers in Guatemala. The Guatemalan Constitution prohibits foreign military operations within its borders, and President Arévalo has dismissed the possibility of US military actions in its territory. In December 2025, however, Arévalo announced that Guatemala had strengthened its coordination with the DEA. Guatemala is part of the US-led Shield of the Americas coalition, along with 17 other countries who have pledged to coordinate intelligence, border security, and military efforts against transnational drug cartels.

The massacre in Huité happened just one week after the US restored Foreign Military Funding to Guatemala.

- **José Rubén Zamora Denounces Death Threats Against His Son**

On October 28, Guatemalan journalist José Rubén Zamora, founder of *El Periódico*, expanded a complaint before the Public Ministry over threats and harassment directed at his family through social media. Zamora reported that his son Ramón had been targeted by an anonymous X account known as "¡Yes, Master!" following the October 17 murder of anti-corruption lawyer Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa, who had represented Zamora in his criminal proceedings. The account reportedly used the expression "La Playita," which Zamora interpreted as a death threat because similar language had been directed at Foppa before his assassination. Zamora called on prosecutors to identify those responsible for the messages and investigate possible connections between online intimidation and violence against journalists, lawyers, and justice officials.

The complaint comes amid growing concerns over coordinated online harassment against Zamora and his family. An investigation published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford examined more than 675,000 posts and interactions on X and identified patterns of intimidation, criminalization, and coordinated attacks targeting the journalist and his relatives. Zamora, who spent more than three years in pretrial detention and remains subject to criminal proceedings, urged the Public Ministry to preserve digital evidence and investigate whether the threats are part of an organized campaign. The case raises concerns about the safety of journalists and their families and the ability of Guatemalan authorities to prevent threats from escalating into violence.

- **Indigenous Residents Injured as Police Open Way for Electric Company**

On September 28, more than 100 National Civil Police (PNC) officers accompanied workers from the electricity transmission company TRECSA into the Maya Kaqchikel community of El Pilar 1, in San Juan Sacatepéquez, to facilitate the installation of electrical towers. Community members reported that several residents were injured when police used tear gas against their peaceful resistance. They also denounced the seizure of two cell phones and a pickup truck, damage to crops and community property, and restrictions on access to land they say is legally registered in their name and where their crops are planted.

The Ajchijay Ancestral Authority alleged that the project lacked an environmental impact assessment and prior, free, and informed consultation with the affected Indigenous communities. It also accused police officers of acting as private security for TRECSA and attempting to bribe community authorities. TRECSA had sought access to the land since February, citing the General Electricity Law and its authorization to develop transmission infrastructure. The

September 28 operation followed a provisional injunction issued by the Constitutional Court 11 days earlier, which directed security forces to guarantee certain constitutional rights in connection with the company's access to the area.

Case Updates

- **CC Confirms Release of Journalist José Rubén Zamora**

Journalist José Rubén Zamora has been released following a ruling issued by the Supreme Court of Justice and ratified by the Constitutional Court (CC). The October 6th ruling follows the Public Ministry's withdrawal of a second appeal, which had been filed by former prosecutor Rafael Curruchiche, who sought to have the journalist returned to jail. Zamora spent more than 1,290 days in prison. He was originally imprisoned on July 29, 2022, for allegedly concealing the origin of Q300,000, even though he presented the appropriate documents showing that the cash was from the sale of a work of art made in order to pay the salaries of workers of the now defunct newspaper *El Periódico*. The Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity also accused him of obstruction of justice during a 2013 money-laundering investigation. Prosecutors later added a third charge for allegedly falsifying signatures on sworn declaration forms used to travel abroad.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his detention to be arbitrary in July 2024 and called for his immediate release, as well as reparations. The UN and other organizations considered the charges against him to be baseless and politically motivated, linked to his journalistic work exposing corruption. The news outlet Zamora founded and led, *El Periódico*, had published 144 reports on corruption in the previous administration before he was arrested.

- **CC Will Review Injunction in Death Squad Dossier Case**

The Constitutional Court, in agreeing to review an injunction in the Death Squad Dossier case, has paved the way for a former military officer to have the case against him dismissed. The former military officer, Edgar Rolando Hernández Méndez, was commander of Military Zone 21. The injunction, issued at the request of the Public Ministry under Consuelo Porras, challenges a judge's order to keep the case open. The judge rejected a motion to dismiss the criminal case and directed the Human Rights Prosecutor's Office to file an indictment and request that the military officer stand trial for crimes related to serious human rights violations during the internal armed conflict. The Public Ministry sought the appeal to close the case on January 7, arguing that the judge "violated due process by rejecting its requests and ordering the

filing of an indictment." The judge was also accused of assessing evidence and issuing "rulings that should be made by trial court."

Hernández Méndez was charged with crimes against humanity and aggravated rape against Candelaria Pop Coy. Pop Coy was arrested in 1984, along with her husband and son, and they were held captive at Military Base 21; the events of their imprisonment were documented in a Diario Militar, or military dossier, which has become a central piece of evidence in the Military Diary or Death Squad Dossier case. This document details captures, surveillance, illegal detentions, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions of approximately 195 people carried out by state intelligence agencies between 1983 and 1985, during Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores' de facto government. If the Constitutional Court grants the injunction, it could suspend the order to file charges, a move that could lead to the dismissal of the criminal proceedings in his case, preventing the victims' families from seeking justice through the judicial system.

- **Government Apologizes to Criminalized Indigenous Leaders**

On October 7, President Arévalo and other representatives from the Arévalo government publicly apologized to five Indigenous authorities who were released from prison following rulings in September that determined their innocence on charges of sedition, terrorism, illicit association, obstruction of criminal action, and obstruction of justice. Luis Pacheco, Basilio Puac, Héctor Chaclán, María Juana Elías, and Esteban Toc, the accused leaders, were charged after leading peaceful mobilizations to defend democracy in 2023 after the presidential election. Attorney General Julio Saavedra, speaking on the stage at the National Palace, said, "It is necessary to say it clearly, the defense of democracy is also exercised from the communities and Indigenous authorities. Participating in these mobilizations cannot be considered an act contrary to the democratic order, it is unacceptable to call them an act of terrorism." While the apology recognized the legitimacy of the demonstrations by Indigenous communities, it did not repair the damage endured by the Indigenous leaders and their families. Luis Pacheco and Héctor Chaclán each spent 468 days in jail. In a conversation with Prensa Comunitaria, Chaclán stated, "Apologies must go further; they must recognize that the owners of this territory in Guatemala are the Indigenous peoples and all of us who live in Guatemala."

María Juana Elías Tzunún had suffered exile as a result of a criminal complaint that was brought against her. She was able to return this year for the legal case, and her innocence was also proven. María's speech used both the indigenous K'iche' language, as well as Spanish, and outlined all that she and her family had suffered during her exile and 15 months of being unemployed. She also spoke out against the directors of the Foundation Against Terrorism, stating that they were the ones who brought the charges against her and the other leaders, yet are

facing no repercussions. The apology concluded with a speech from Arévalo. The president apologized to each of the leaders and emphasized that the state had failed to protect them.

- **Prosecutors Raid USAC over Missing Student Records**

On September 18, riot police, led by the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, entered the University of San Carlos (USAC) to investigate missing and possibly deleted student files from the Department of Registration and Statistics (RyE). The raid followed complaints from students who had organized and protested against de facto rector Walter Mazariegos's fraudulent activities and then found in August that their records had disappeared. Luis Pedro Ortiz, head of the General Directorate of Administration and one of Mazariegos's main collaborators, denied that student records were deleted. The university, however, had emailed these students a message saying that their paperwork was missing and that "if new paperwork was not presented, student registrations could be voided." The Public Prosecutor's Office extracted and analyzed the computer records in the RyE system from Ortiz's building. The Second Pluripersonal Court gave prosecutors the authorization to investigate and review the data between July 1 and 31, 2026.

The raid marks the first time the Public Prosecutor's Office has taken action against Mazariegos. Former Attorney General Consuelo Porras was known for shielding him during her time in office and even persecuted many students and staff at the university, despite the 17 complaints lodged against him.

Other Information

- **Judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez Files Petition Against Guatemala**

Former high-risk cases judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez filed a petition against the State of Guatemala before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), citing the persecution and criminalization he suffered that forced him to leave the country to protect his life. He had served as a judge for 23 years. He filed the demand during the IACHR's 197th Session in Panama City, with legal support from the Center for Justice and International Law. The petition documents ten preliminary hearings initiated against him since 2016, three of which were opened simultaneously in 2022. Added to this were 25 criminal and administrative complaints, 21 of which were dismissed or closed due to lack of merit. According to the petitioners, these actions constituted direct retaliation for Gálvez's judicial rulings in cases involving high-level corruption and human rights violations. Because of the judicial persecution he has suffered, he has been living in exile since 2022.

- **Congress Reforms Criminal Procedure Code**

On September 29, Congress approved Decree 23-2026, which reforms Guatemala's criminal procedure code, impacting issues related to personal liberty, due process, and victims' rights. The reforms include establishing time limits for pre-trial detention to avoid indefinite extensions, aligning provisions with the 2011 reform, and clarifying the order of events between the formal indictment and the application of coercive measures. More specifically, the reforms establish that a person cannot be sent to pre-trial detention before giving their first statement before a judge. There must also be sufficient evidence that a crime was committed to impose pre-trial detention, and, if applicable, it cannot last longer than a year.

- **Workers' Organizations Demonstrate on October 12th**

On October 12, 2026, the Day of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance in Guatemala, Indigenous and campesino representatives from the Campesino's Committee of the Highlands (CCDA), the Campesino Development Committee (CODECA), and the National Struggle Front (FNL) mobilized nationally to protest the rising cost of living, cuts to government social programs, and government corruption. The protests spanned the nation, with notable concentrations in Guatemala City, beginning in front of the Supreme Court, making a stop at the National Palace, and ending at the house of Oliverio Castañeda De León, a student leader who was murdered in 1978 during the armed internal conflict. Grassroots mobilizations occurred in the departments of Sololá, Cobán, Alta Verapaz, Escuintla, Totonicapán, Retalhuleu, Huehuetenango, and Petén.

The organizations officially denounced the State's abandonment of the public health system and the State's condoning of the abuses against the population by the companies Energuate and the Electric Energy Company of Guatemala, SA (EEGSA). CUC specifically called out the Arévalo government for failing to act concretely on the demands of indigenous communities. CODECA also mentioned inefficient public transit and students' rights as reasons for the mobilization. Jatk Guzmán, a member of CODECA, stated that the organization is "... mobilizing to demand, among other things, the resignation of Walter Mazariegos, who is not the rector of the University of San Carlos, and an end to the criminalization of students. We also reiterate that Initiative 6665 is a law that criminalizes the people and is completely unconstitutional. In fact, we have filed an injunction against the proposal. But, in order to resist and move forward, we must organize ourselves as the people and workers of Guatemala."

The organizations also called for the ending of the dispossession of land from indigenous and campesino communities. These demands extended to an end to the criminalization of social justice and called for effective respect for the right to defend human rights; they also demanded that the Public Prosecutor's Office conduct independent and objective investigations into

possible acts of corruption. These calls for justice come after Indigenous leaders were released of all charges last month following the criminalization of Indigenous protests for democracy in 2023. The organizations that brought about these charges have not been punished or investigated.