



Newsletter – Spring 2022

After a long hiatus, welcome to the latest edition of our Newsletter. We hope that this provides you with a fair reflection of what **Guatemala Solidarity Network (GSN)** has been following.

Independent justice, in Guatemala, has been struggling against a serious and concerted attack from reactionary agents in the Government, in Congress, and in business. Members of each have been targetted in various cases of corruption, and now we find that the Attorney General, María Consuelo Porras, has been instrumental in ensuring that these cases do not come to trial. It has also been suggested that the AG is seeking re-election to this post in the upcoming selection process. It would be reasonable to assume that her office's actions (inactions!) during the current term would make her a strong candidate. Following the ousting of CICIG, the Special Prosecutor's Office against Impunity (*Fiscalía Especial contra la Impunidad* – FECI) was seen as one of the last institutions left fighting corruption and impunity. The Attorney General dismissed the head of FECI, Juan Francisco Sandoval, last year and forced him into exile. Many of the Prosecutors within FECI have subsequently left or been forced out.

This is a massive setback for justice in Guatemala but, in the last few months, we witnessed a significant success in the search for justice for past crimes. The case of the Achí women was harrowing on many levels but a guilty verdict was handed down to five ex-PAC members for the crimes dating back to the early 1980s.

December 29th 2021 saw the 25th Anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accords which brought an end to the Internal Armed Conflict, which ravaged the country for over thirty years. However, peace is not merely the absence of war nor the absence of genocide, and Guatemala still seeks peace and justice 25 years on.

Mujeres Achí Case

After a series of hearings in 2021, the courts determined that five men should face trial for their alleged role in sexual violence against 36 Maya Achí women. The defendants were each former members of the Civil Self-Defense Patrols (*Patrulleros de Auto-Defensa Civil* – PAC). The PAC were set up by the Guatemala military, to act as their civilian arm and protect their communities. It was another layer of violence inflicted by the Guatemala state against rural communities, primarily Indigenous. PAC members carried out violence, often against their own community members, and survivors of the violence were condemned to continue living in those communities among their abusers.

The trial of the five ex-PAC, for the crimes against the Maya Achí women was, naturally, a distressing process for the survivors and their families, re-opening old wounds and re-awakening their trauma.

The trial began on January 5th, 2022, and the guilty verdict was handed down on the 24th, three weeks later. Each one of the ex-PAC members was sentenced to a minimum of 30 years in prison for rape and crimes against humanity. Gabriel Cuxum Alvarado, Damian Cuxum Alvarado, Francisco Cuxum Alvarado, Benvenuto Ruiz Aquino, and Bernardo Ruiz Aquino were found guilty of the crimes carried out between 1981 and 1983 against the Maya Achí women.

We featured a piece by **Jo-Marie Burt** and **Paolo Estrada**, in **NACLA**, about the recently started trial of former members of the Civil Self-Defense Patrols (PAC), for the rape of Indigenous women during the internal armed conflict, and you can read it here, [In Guatemala, Ex-Paramilitaries Face Trial for Wartime Rape of Indigenous Women](#).

We followed this up with a series of blog posts by **The Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network (BTS)** in relation to the case of the wartime rape of Indigenous women, and the trial of five of those accused, and you can read that here, [Weaving Justice with the 36 Maya Achi Women](#).

Sandra Cuffe wrote in **The Guardian**, on the victory in court for the women, stating that, "*This court believes the testimony of the Achi women*", and we featured it here, [Mujeres Achi – Five ex-PACs Found Guilty And Sentenced](#).

In light of the verdicts handed down, **Famdegua** and **Caso Diario Militar** issued a statement in support of the Achi women, and GSN translated and featured this here, [Achi women, their truth weaves the story](#).

Impunity Watch Guatemala presented an infographic to outline the Remedial Measures awarded to the *Maya Achi women* in the case against the five ex-PAC members, and GSN translated and featured this here, [Achi Women - Remedial Measures and UN Statement](#).

Oscar Lopez and **Jody García** write, in the **New York Times**, about the Achí Women Case, and the sentences handed down, within the context of a corrupt judiciary and the likelihood of real justice being denied as time moves on. GSN featured that here, [Guatemala Sentences Former Fighters to 30 Years in Prison for Rape](#).

Quorum is a digital media organisation, based in Guatemala, and they presented a short piece in response to the verdict. GSN translated and featured this here, [Achí Women's case ends in 30-year prison sentences](#)

Eloise Barry wrote in **TIME** on the fight for justice carried out by the Maya Achí women, culminating in the sentencing, and spoke about how the the pain endured over the years, by the surviving women, was palpable. The piece featured the work of the *Rabinal Legal Clinic (Asociación Bufete Jurídico Popular en Rabinal – ABJPR)*. **Jo-Marie Burt** spoke of the case with reference to the ongoing challenges in getting justice for past crimes in Guatemala, and we featured the article here, [Decades After Guatemala's Silent Holocaust, These Indigenous Women Are Fighting to Bring Their Rapists to Justice](#).

Jo-Marie Burt and **Paulo Estrada** wrote, in **El Faro**, on the verdicts in the Achí Women Case and what justice means for the surviving victims – perhaps justice but not closure, and GSN featured that piece here, [Imperfect Justice Is Still Justice for Wartime Rape Survivors in Guatemala](#).

Guatemala: 25 Years Later

On the 29th December, 1996, the signing took place of the Peace Accords ending Guatemala's 36-year civil war and which, it was hoped, would open up a new chapter in the country's history. The conflict in Guatemala was the longest and bloodiest of Latin America's Cold War civil wars, leaving between 150,000 and 200,000 civilians dead or "disappeared", primarily among the Indigenous populations of the highlands.

It was seen at the time that the Accords were a mixture of strong and weak agreements and was the outcome of a negotiated settlement brokered by the United Nations. These Accords represented compromises on both sides and included significant constitutional reforms and were to be internationally binding and to be verified by the UN.

However, peace is not merely the absence of war nor the absence of genocide, and the intervening years has been largely a disappointment when viewed through the hopes of the population in 1996.

GSN featured an article by **Sandra Cuffe**, in **Al Jazeera**, on the challenges facing those seeking justice for the crimes of the State during the internal armed conflict, and the forces at work to preserve

immunity on the part of the military, and you can read that here, [Guatemalans still seek justice, 25 years after civil war's end](#).

We featured a piece that **Jeff Abbott** wrote in **The Progressive**, reflecting on the failure of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, twenty-five years after their signing, and the unmet hopes for social justice. You can find that here, [Guatemala's Failed Promise](#).

A long-term Guatemala observer, **W. George Lovell**, wrote in **The Conversation**, on the failing of the peace accords in bringing a *firm and lasting* peace, while highlighting the legacy of violence, corruption, neo-liberalism, and over exploitation of human and natural resources. **GSN** featured that piece here, [Guatemala: 25 years later, 'firm and lasting peace' is nowhere to be found](#).

We featured a commentary by **Jo-Marie Burt** and **Paulo Estrada**, in **WOLA**, on the challenges facing those seeking justice for crimes carried out during the internal armed conflict. Many successes have occurred but the state, including the military and the oligarchy, is fighting back, putting this struggle for justice at risk. The writers outlined the successes, as well as setbacks and ongoing challenges, and the piece ended with some recommendations which you can find here, [Hope amidst the darkness: Victims continue to press for justice for wartime atrocities in Guatemala](#).

GSN featured an article that **Giovanni Batz** wrote in **NACLA** on the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accords that put an end to the internal armed conflict that had rendered Guatemalan society for more than thirty years. However, in Guatemala, safeguards against corruption, impunity, and state violence are being dismantled by the politicians, elites, and military and some fear the return of an authoritarian state. We featured the piece here, [25 Years After the Peace Accords, Democracy Weak in Guatemala](#).

Resource Extraction

Attacks on environmental defenders continues to grow around the world and Guatemala is no exception. Interests in mining, palm oil, hydroelectric, and in the land itself show work hand in glove with facilitators in government and in the relevant ministries.

The 2021 Alice Zachmann Human Rights Award was awarded to **The El Estor Resistance**. Indigenous authorities, along with the Fisherman's Guild in El Estor, established a peaceful resistance encampment to block supply trucks from accessing an illegal nickel mine that threatens their lives and the environment and because of their effective opposition to the mine, members of the El Estor Resistance have been facing threats. The President declared a state of siege, suspending constitutional rights, and thousands of Guatemalan security forces violently cleared the encampment and escorted trucks to the mine. **GSN** featured the award, courtesy of GHRC, here [2021 Alice Zachmann Award: El Estor Resistance](#).

GSN featured an article by **Herbert Sandoval**, from the Social Intercultural Movement of the People of Ixcán, Guatemala (*Movimiento Social Intercultural del Pueblo de Ixcán, Guatemala*), writing in the **World Rainforest Movement**. The destruction being caused by palm oil monoculture in the Municipality of Ixcán, is a consequence of 'systematic dispossession', placing it in a historical context of state violence, resource extraction, and environmental destruction. You can read more here, [Oil Palm Monoculture in Ixcán Municipality, Guatemala: A Story of Dispossession and Deception](#).

Forbidden Stories is a network of journalists whose mission is to protect, pursue and publish the work of other journalists facing threats, prison, or murder, and **GSN** featured their presentation of *Mining Secrets*, the result of a leak of thousands of documents from mining giant Solway, the mining company operating in El Estor (see above). Also featured, by **GSN**, are resultant articles by Carmen Reina in Prensa Comunitaria, Julie López in El Faro, and Joe Parkin Daniels in The Guardian. You can find out more here, [Forbidden Stories – Mining Secrets](#).

Ten years ago, on March 2nd, 2012, the communities of San José de Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc, just north of Guatemala City, united and established a protest camp, '**La Puya**', outside of the entrance of the El Tambor Gold mine, which had been imposed upon them. Since then, the peaceful resistance

has struggled in the face of threats, intimidation, an attempted assassination, and a violent eviction, while Court rulings down the years have included a suspension of activities on the mine and the ordering of a community consultation. A Letter of Solidarity was presented on this anniversary, on the website of **Protection International**, and signed by more than fifty organisations. **GSN** featured this and you can read more, including further links, here, [‘La Puya’: Ten Years Of Resistance, The Rhythm Continues](#).

Justice

GSN featured an article by **Kevin Sieff**, in **The Washington Post**, on the challenges facing an independent judiciary in Guatemala through the situation of Judge Erika Aifán and the ongoing State attempts at criminalisation. Judge Aifán is the judge of Guatemala’s high-risk court, handling the country’s biggest corruption and criminal cases, including several indictments targeting politicians and wealthy business executives. Her bravery is unquestioned and neither is the cowardice of the country’s political and business elite. You can read more here, [This judge is one of the last U.S. allies in the Guatemala corruption fight. Politicians keep trying to sideline her](#).

Because of continued threats against her life and the complete absence of protection from the Guatemala state, Judge Erika Aifán decided to leave Guatemala. **GSN** featured an interview with her carried out by **José Luis Sanz** in **El Faro**, and you can read it here, [Judge Aifán, from Exile: “My life was in danger in Guatemala”](#).

GSN also featured a translation of an interview by **Andrea Rodríguez** with **Yassmin Barrios**, the president of the High Risk Court "A", where she has confronted and condemned perpetrators of genocide, as in the case of Efraín Ríos Montt, and dealing with high impact cases from crimes against humanity, as in the case of the Maya Achi Women (see above). The sentencing in that latter case, restored some hope in justice for many women. The interview was published on **RUDA**, and you can read more here, [Being a Judge in Guatemala: Interview with Yassmin Barrios](#).

Miscellaneous

March 2022 is the fifth anniversary of the catastrophic fire at the *Hogar Seguro* Virgen de la Asunción, just outside of Guatemala City. On the 8th March 2017, International Women’s Day, 56 young women and girls were locked in a small classroom and only fifteen of them survived, albeit with life changing consequences. **GSN** featured a short film by Victoria Bouloubasis and Monica Wise, in co-production with Agencia Ocote, for the special series “**No Fue El Fuego**” (“It wasn’t the fire”). The film delves into the reasons why these young women and girls were in the care (‘protection’) home, the abandonment of the young women and girls by the State, and the shortcomings of the Guatemalan protection system. You can find out more about the film, as well as link to a podcast by Latin America Bureau, with Kings College, London, here [Niñas / Somos el fuego](#).

Marta Elena Casaús Arzú wrote the book, *Guatemala: Linaje y Racismo* (*Guatemala: Lineage and Racism*), holding up a mirror to the racist Guatemalan oligarch families of which she was a part. **Plaza Pública** published an interview with her in 2017 by **Carlos Arrazola** and the subsequent English translation was published recently in *El Faro*. It is a fascinating interview on race and racism in Guatemala, and **GSN** featured it here, [The Origins of Racism in Guatemala — An Interview with Marta Elena Casaús Arzú on Anti-Indigenous Racism](#).

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