

This is how survivors and victims' families experienced the "bittersweet" ruling in the Hogar Seguro case

By María José Longo Bautista

Morning on the August 12, 2025. Two young women are seated in the fifth courtroom of the *Torre de Tribunales de Guatemala* (Guatemala City Courthouse Tower of Guatemala). Holding hands, they listen attentively to the words of Judge Ingrid Vannesa Cifuentes.

Cifuentes reads the ruling in the *Hogar Seguro* case, a court case investigating the responsibility of former officials in the deaths of 41 girls and adolescents in state care.

The two women listening to the judge's words, clinging to each other, are Emelin Guadalupe Del Cid Linares and Mariana Palencia Ortiz.

Emelin Del Cid is one of the 15 survivors of the fire at the *Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción*. The day before the ruling, she traveled more than 200 kilometers from the east to the capital of Guatemala.

Mariana Palencia is the sister of Kimberly Palencia, one of the 41 girls who died in the fire. She spent the previous night awake. She couldn't sleep and hasn't eaten anything all day.

The two are ready to learn the conclusion of a long wait. Eight years since the events and 120 hearings since the trial began on January 10, 2024, they finally feel that some justice can be done.

The Weight of Impunity

Of the seven defendants, the judge has just announced that six are guilty. The former officials of Jimmy Morales's government were sentenced to terms ranging from 6 to 25 years. The prosecution had requested sentences of more than 100 years.

Although the sentences are not what they expected, the victims feel they have taken a step toward justice. It is definitely a step that can free them from feelings of impunity.

"I don't feel happy or sad. I feel like it's a weight lifted off my shoulders, because those people were guilty. The sentence may be favorable for us, but I don't think they can give us back our friends and comrades. I can only say that they are now resting in peace," Emelin del Cid told Agencia Ocote.

During the time the judge read her conclusions and issued the sentence, the two women went through different stages. They held hands, rested their heads on each other's shoulders, hugged, sighed, and burst into tears as Ingrid Vannesa Cifuentes recalled the events that led to the girls' deaths, the abuse they suffered at home, the burning wounds they suffered, and the fact that they were locked up, crying for help, and the door wasn't opened.

For Mariana Palencia, achieving a verdict is part of fulfilling a promise she made to her sister when she died.

"I told her I would be here, that no matter what happened, I would be here until the guilty parties paid and were convicted. And that's what happened. I leave happy knowing there was a verdict, that they will pay. It wasn't the time we hoped, but we know they are guilty," said Palencia Ortiz.

For her, hearing the proven facts was like reopening a wound. Going back in time and remembering when her sister's body was handed to her.

Up ahead, two rows from Mariana, among the press, a young woman wearing a turquoise hoodie and sunglasses could be seen. She is overcome with tears and at times needs to leave the room.

She wasn't sitting with the rest of the audience. She was in the space assigned to journalists. She also survived the Hogar Seguro fire. She said she would like to be a journalist so her voice could be heard, so that it could help other people.

Between Triumph and Fear

There are a few moments in the courtroom when the crying subsides. In one of them, one of the survivors waves her arms in celebration. Some faces break into a small smile. The judge has just ordered an investigation into the role of former President Jimmy Morales in the Hogar Seguro case.

When the verdict ends, applause breaks the silence. A woman in the audience shouts: "Justice for the girls of Hogar Seguro." "Justice!" other women respond.

At that moment, in the front row of the audience, a woman joins the chant and the applause. This is Roxana Tojil, mother of Mirsa Rosmery López Tojil, a girl who experienced violence against women from the moment she was in her mother's womb.

Mirsa dreamed of buying a blue car to go for rides with her family and a house so her mother and maternal grandmother would have a home. She wanted to be a lawyer and defend women victims of violence.

Mirsa was born in Roosevelt Hospital, a building in Guatemala City that has been in existence for more than half a century. Sixteen years later, she would die in that same place, where she arrived with burns from the fire at the *Hogar Seguro*.

After the sentencing, survivors and relatives of the victims agreed about fearing for their lives. After their testimony and their resolve served to convict six of the defendants, they fear for their safety.

A Bittersweet Sentence

There are more people in the courtroom than usual during the case's hearings. Many of them are survivors and relatives of the victims.

Along with Emelin Del Cid and Mariana Palencia is Cynthia Paola Morales Alfaro. She is also a survivor of the *Hogar Seguro*. She is accompanied by her mother, Ada Alfaro. They listen to the sentence together. The mother hugs her daughter and touches her shoulder in a sign of support. During the trial, she attended many hearings on behalf of her daughter.

In the back rows of the courtroom is Dacia Marcela Ramírez Sosa, Ashley Gabriela Méndez Ramírez's mother. Supported by her mother, Ashley's grandmother, she holds back her tears as she hears again about the torture her daughter and other girls endured in the state home.

To hear the sentence, Ramírez Sosa left her home at three in the morning, arrived in the capital by public transport, and traveled with a headache, anxiety, and nerves. For her, the sentence was not what she expected.

"It's only a few years, really. For all those girls and the survivors, it's only a few years. It saddens me greatly, but, at least it was a measure of justice," she sums up.

A few steps away is Carmen Urías, the mother of Mayra Haydeé Chután Urías, one of the 41 girls who died at the *Hogar Seguro*. Minutes after the sentencing, Urías holds a sunflower in her hands. She and a group of people gathered in the Human Rights Plaza. They shout: "It wasn't the fire, it was the State." The sentence confirms their slogan.

<https://nofueelfuego.agenciaocote.com/2025/08/13/asi-vivieron-sobrevivientes-y-familiares-de-victimas-la-agridulce-sentencia-del-caso-hogar-seguro/>

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