April 24, 2013

General Otto Perez Molina
President of the Republic of Guatemala
Casa Presidencial
6ta. Avenida 4-65 Zona 1.
Ciudad de Guatemala
Guatemala.

Dear President Otto Perez Molina:

The American Anthropological Association has been following events in the indigenous areas of Guatemala. We write to express our concern about reports we have received concerning threats, attacks, and killings that indigenous people, community leaders, and peasants have confronted in the last year in indigenous areas of Guatemala. These attacks have been argued to be the direct or indirect responsibility of the current government, as well as an expression of centuries of structured racism, marginalization and exclusion inflicted upon the Maya people since colonial times. Assuming these reports are accurate, we urge you to take appropriate actions to address this situation as soon as possible.

The American Anthropological Association is the largest professional association of anthropologists in the world. The objectives of its Committee for Human Rights includes promoting and protecting human rights, working internally with our membership to stimulate informed participation in the area of human rights and to influence and educate the media, policy makers, non-governmental organizations and decision makers about urgent anthropologically relevant cases of potential human rights abuse. In view of these functions we write to express our concern.

We have received reports from the Centro de Análisis, Formación e Incidencia del Pueblo Maya Kayb’alam, anthropologists working in the region, and members of these communities that in the last year there has been an increase in violence against Maya and Xinka leaders, especially those who express civic opposition to metallic mining and hydroelectric international companies, and struggle to defend their ancestral rights to land. Specifically, we are concerned about the
exacerbation of violence against the Maya-K'iche' people (Alaska, Totonicapán, October 2012), the Maya-Q'eqchi' (Polochic area throughout 2012), the Xinka (Santa María Xalapán, Jalapa, March 2013), and the Maya-Q'anjob'al (the municipality of Barillas, Huehuetenango).

Though we are aware that this violence is not a new chapter in Guatemala's history, we hope that the government will not remain distant or pretend ignorance especially in a situation where the Ministro de Gobernación, Mauricio López Bonilla, is responsible for security in Guatemala and publically defends the mining company in the recent killing and torture of the Xinka leaders. There has been international coverage of the following cases. We summarize the core of the media reports below:

(a) The assassination of indigenous leader Santa Alvarado, from the Health Workers Union and the National Front of Struggle, on March 21, 2013. She worked in the National Hospital of Totonicapán.

(b) The ambush and later kidnapping, on March 17, 2013, of four members of the Communal Indigenous Xinka Government of Santa María Xalapán, Jalapa. This apparently resulted in the death of Xinka leader Exaltación Marcos Ucelo, whose body later appeared with signs of having been tortured. The other three leaders were apparently kidnapped and held for several hours, and later freed, but with signs of torture as well. The four victims had participated in the Community Consultation in San Rafael Las Flores, Santa Rosa, focused on the threat of mining development.

(c) A series of events suffered by the Q'anjob'al community of Barrillas, Huehuetenango. Eleven leaders have apparently been jailed for eight months without charge; others have outstanding arrest warrants. The root of the conflict is a hydroelectric project, Hidro Santa Cruz, that a Spanish company, and the Guatemalan government are said to be imposing on the community. On May 1, 2012, private security agents of the company fired on protesters and killed Andrés Francisco Miguel. We are told that the government has imposed a state of siege and is persecuting organizers.

March 15, 2013, security forces are said to have arrested Rubén Herrera, a human rights activist linked to the community.

(d) The Maya-Tz'utujil leader, Jerónimo Sol Ajcót from Santiago Atitlán, Sololá, was reported killed on March 11, 2013, attacked at dawn by well-armed and hooded perpetrators. Ajcót had received death threats since 2012 and was a member of the board of the Maya-Tz'utujil Association of Farmers from Santiago Atitlán and of the National Indigenous and Peasant Coordination, CONIC.

(e) On March 11, 2013, armed men are reported to have broken into the home of Rubén Mazariégos Vásquez and attempted to kill him. Mazariégos was General Secretary of the Public Health Union and vice president of the Labor Union UASP.

(f) On March 8, 2013, Carlos Hernández was reported killed in Camotán, Chiquimula. Hernandez was a member of the Peasant Coordinator “New Day,” as well as two other organizations.
(g) In early March 2013, the Agua Caliente community in the Polochic valley was reportedly dispossessed of their ancestral lands by private security guards of the sugarcane company, Chab’il Utzaj. This was one of the many cases in which Q'eqchi' families were reportedly violently expelled from their lands and their homes, and had their crops destroyed.\(^\text{vii}\)

(h) In February 2013, Tomás Quej, a leader of the Consejo de Pueblos de Tezulutlán was reported killed in Purulhá, Baja Verapaz, after being kidnapped and tortured. He worked to recover the land that had been taken away from his community in 2011.\(^\text{viii}\)

(i) The office of the Association for the Advancement of Social Sciences in Guatemala, AVANCSO, was ransacked on January 18, 2013. We are told that all the computers and most of AVANCSO’s research materials, assembled over the past 25 years were removed.\(^\text{ix}\)

The AAA is deeply concerned about the reported deaths of many indigenous leaders and the threats against them, their families, institutions, and communities. Although each of these acts has been denounced by civil society organizations, we are concerned that government authorities have done little to address these abuses.

We urge the Guatemalan authorities to investigate the origins of this violence against indigenous peoples, in accordance with your laws and international agreements, such as the ILO Convention 169 to which Guatemala is a signatory.

Anthropologists and social scientists from Guatemala, the US, and other countries have been working in Guatemala for many decades, frequently in collaboration with indigenous people. As the profession with the longest historical experience in this field, we ask you to seriously consider taking steps to prevent further unnecessary suffering of innocent people, and to demonstrate Guatemala’s commitment to the respect and protection of human rights.

Respectfully,

\[\text{Leith Mullings} \]

Leith Mullings, President
American Anthropological Association

\[\text{Eric Johnson, Chair} \]
AAA Committee for Human Rights.

\(^{1}\) See http://noticiascomunicarte.blogspot.com/2013/03/entre-xalapan-y-barillas-el-resurgir-de.html.


