

Bulletin No. 52



PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL GUATEMALA PROJECT

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“That history is alive, and we have not forgotten it”:

The Los Josefinos massacre



Entrance to the community of Los Josefinos, in the municipality of Las Cruces, Petén, 5.12.2025

“We thank God that we are alive so that we can share what happened to us; what we suffered then is painful to remember.”¹

“On the night of April 29 and in the early hours of April 30, 1982,” in the context of the Internal Armed Conflict (IAC, 1960-1996) and one month after the coup d’état of March 23, 1982,² “members of the Guatemalan army entered and laid siege to the village of Los Josefinos, in the department of Petén. The military cruelly, violently and indiscriminately massacred a large number of the town’s inhabitants, including women and children. In their effort to completely destroy the community, they also caused massive destruction, killing animals and setting fire to houses, huts and other properties.”³ In the aftermath of these horrendous crimes, the survivors have continued to suffer from the trauma and from ongoing violations of their human rights such as forced displacement and its consequent sense of uprootedness, forced disappearance and lack of reparations. “Those of us who suffered it directly did not receive any support from the State, the government did not care about anything, instead we were persecuted, we were discriminated against, we were accused of being guerrillas and of many other things that we did not understand.” And of course they were stripped of their land: “lost my plot of land. When I left it was abandoned, then I returned, and it was already owned by someone else; he told me that the army had given it to him.”

Although 42 years have passed since the massacre took place, those who survived explain that “this pain does not go away” and that the story “is as vivid as if it had happened yesterday”.⁴ At the time of writing (2021), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (I/A Court H.R.) has issued a final sentence against the State of Guatemala, but nine reparation measures have yet to be implemented. These include: the investigation and prosecution of the case; the continued search for disappeared persons; the return of displaced families; the provision of resources for the health center; the creation of a documentary about the events to preserve historical memory; the continued construction of the mausoleum to dignify the victims’ memory; and compensation for material damages. Each measure fulfilled is a guarantee of non-repetition. As one of the survivors points out, “there aren’t enough institutions, nationally and internationally, that come to learn about what the massacre was like.”

Background: living on one’s own land

The survivors remember what life was like before the massacre. According to their testimony, in the 1970s they lived happily in the village, because of the opportunities for farming. One man says that he planted corn and beans, and that beekeeping provided enough income for him and his family: “In my case, prior to the massacre I was not

1 Direct quotes in this article that do not mention another source were gathered during a meeting that took place in the village of Los Josefinos, as part of an accompaniment we provided to the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA) on April 29, 2024. At this meeting, massacre survivors, who are still seeking justice, shared their feelings with us.

2 This coup marked the beginning of the de facto presidency of José Efraín Ríos Montt, twice convicted of genocide against the Ixil people, committed during the 16 months he remained in power until he was ousted by another coup d’état on August 8, 1983.

3 FAMDEGUA and CEJIL, Case of the Village of Los Josefinos Massacre v. Guatemala. Brief of pleadings, motions and evidence, 24 Feb 2020.

4 Pérez, R., “La historia está viva y no se nos olvida”: caso Los Josefinos llega a la CortelDH, Prensa Comunitaria, 5 May 2021.

in need, that’s why I stopped going to school, because my goal was to have a piece of land, and I had achieved it.”

In the early years of the Carlos Arana government (1970-1974), a state agrarian development project was set up in the Petén, with the aim of “colonizing the department and generating agricultural development.” In the early years of the Carlos Arana government (1970-1974), a state agrarian development project was set up in the Petén, with the aim of “colonizing the department and generating agricultural development.” The official goal was to “populate these distant lands, build schools, roads, clinics and land so that the peasants” could “grow crops and promote development.”⁵ But according to information collected at the Nuevo Horizonte Museum, the real objective behind this campaign, intended to settle the peasant population in the region, was to use them as a human bulwark to prevent looting from the neighboring country, Mexico.⁶

As a result, families from other parts of the country who needed land were encouraged to settle in Petén. “The peasants were thrilled to learn that they would be working their own land” on which they would plant crops and build their houses. At the end of 1972, the State, through the National Enterprise for the Economic Development of Petén (FYDEP), granted plots of land in the village of Los Josefinos, in the municipality of La Libertad. It was named Los Josefinos because the majority of the population came from Puerto San José, in the department of Escuintla.⁷

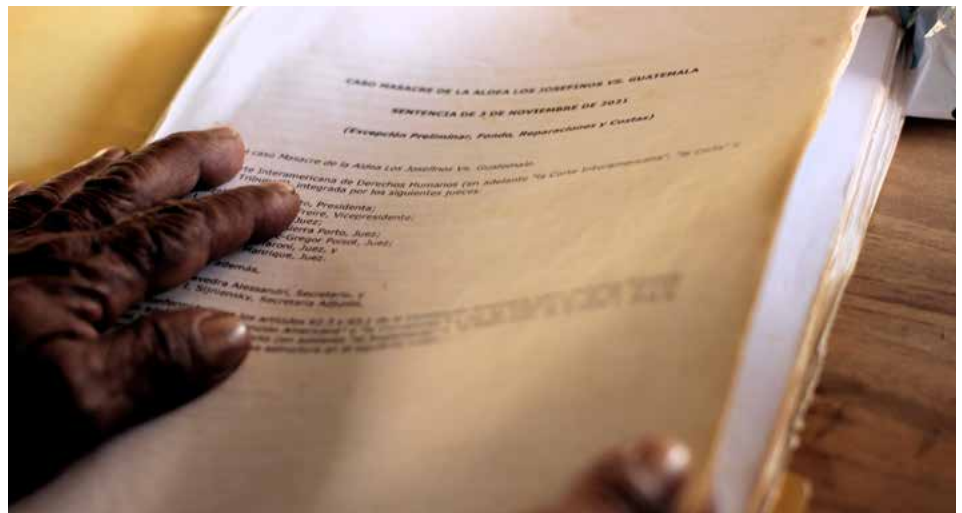
Context: “That time is painful to remember”

This period of happiness lasted only a few years. At the beginning of the 1980s, many families were forced to flee and leave their land. On the morning of April 29, 1982, guerrilla members entered the village, held a rally and “executed” two men who, according to the guerrillas, were linked to the army.

As a result, in the afternoon there was a confrontation between the guerrillas and the army in a place near the village. At midnight the army entered the village and carried out the massacre. In addition to what was reported at the beginning of this article, according to one of the survivors, some of the women and girls were raped before being executed. To date, “there is no certainty about the identity and the total number of people who lost their lives as a result of these events.”⁸ The survivors remember how they fled with nothing but the clothes on their backs

and scattered across different parts of the country, with some even going as far as Mexico. “The village was left desolate and practically abandoned. (...) Several families were separated while escaping, some reuniting years later,” while others, despite having been reunited “never managed to re-establish their family ties.”⁹

One survivor recalls with horror what happened that April 29: “We were terrified by what had happened. That afternoon was an afternoon of anguish for us.”¹⁰ One woman, who was 28 at the time, said that she saw children clutching the hands of people who were on fire. She had four children and lost them all. Another woman, who was 13 years old, explains that she was studying at the time, but after the massacre she was unable to continue because her family lost everything, and she was forced to start working. The material, psychological and emotional conditions in which the survivors found themselves were very difficult.



The sentence of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights accompanies the survivors at every meeting, 5.12.2025

5 Newspaper archive, 1970: campesinos del sur colonizarán Petén, Prensa Libre, 15 Dec 2017.

6 We gathered this information during our visit to the Nuevo Horizonte Museum, located in the community of the same name, in Santa Ana, Petén in December 2024.

7 Newspaper archive, Prensa Libre, Op Cit.

8 I/A Court H.R., Case of the Village of Los Josefinos Massacre vs. Guatemala. Sentence of 3 Nov 2021.

9 FAMDEGUA and CEJIL, Op. Cit.

10 Pérez, R. Op Cit.

The Los Josefinos massacre was part of the counterinsurgency strategy of terror, racism and stigmatization carried out by the State during the IAC. During that time, mainly between 1978 and 1982, the army deployed excessive violence with total impunity against people, organizations and communities considered “internal enemies.” Forced recruitment, the militarization of communities, torture, sexual violence, kidnapping, forced disappearances and forced displacement, arbitrary executions and the massacres of predominantly Maya peoples and communities (scorched earth policy) were common practices.¹¹ In fact, 93% of the rapes documented by the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) were committed by state forces

and associated paramilitary groups. The aim of such brutal repression was to subdue, discipline and make an example of the population through fear, impunity and silence.¹²

Between 1982 and 1985, 23 families who survived this massacre returned to the Los Josefinos community, which was under the control of the army, who had divided up the land. According to the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), “the army designated a specific location for them, a piece of land where they could live,” and until 1996 members of these families were forced to participate in the Civil Defense Patrols (PAC) and had to live under the control of the army.¹³

The long road to justice

At the end of the IAC, FAMDEGUA began to support some of the families who survived the Los Josefinos massacre. FAMDEGUA’s then director, Aura Elena Farfán,¹⁴ encouraged them in their search for justice: “face it, speak out, discuss it, tell the truth.”¹⁵ FAMDEGUA represented the victims and later became a plaintiff in the case.

On January 16, 1996, FAMDEGUA reported the events to the Court of First Instance of the Department of Petén. In March of that same year, the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) exhumed the remains of the people massacred, to gather preliminary evidence for the complaint. Nineteen skeletons were exhumed: five children between one month and eleven years old, one adolescent between twelve and eighteen years old and twelve adults. Based on the state of the skeletons and the 27 bullet casings found, FAFG determined that “these people’s deaths were *violent, legally classified as homicide in every case.*”¹⁶ “All the skeletons spoke of sadness, pain and silenced memory.”¹⁷ The following month, the Public Prosecutor’s Office (MP) opened an investigation to determine the facts.

Faced with a lack of progress in the investigation and prosecution of the case in Guatemala, FAMDEGUA and the survivors, took the case to the Inter-American Human Rights System, with the legal support of the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL).¹⁸ On October 27, 2004, they filed the petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR),



One of the reparation measures proposed by the Inter-American Court was the construction of a mausoleum in the community cemetery to commemorate the victims. This was never completed. 5.12.2025.

11 REMHI: Informe del Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, Guatemala: Nunca Más, 24.04.1998.

12 Sanford, V., Dill, K., y Duyos, S., “Guatemala: violencia sexual y genocidio”. F&G Editores, Guatemala 2020.

13 This, and all the quotes from FAMDEGUA members that appear in this article, were drawn from an interview we conducted with three members of FAMDEGUA on 25 July 2024.

14 Human rights defender and founder of the Mutual Support Group (GAM) in 1984 and FAMDEGUA in 1992, dedicated to supporting the families of detained and disappeared people during the IAC.

15 Pérez, R., Op. Cit.

16 I/A Court H.R., Op. Cit.

17 Sanford, V., Dill, K., y Duyos, S., Op. Cit.

18 Ibid.



Attorney Edgar Perez explains the legal situation of the case to the survivors and family members: “It is important to give testimonies, because they help preserve the memory”. 5.12.2025

and 15 years later the case was brought before the I/A Court H.R.

On November 3, 2021, the I/A Court H.R. declared the State of Guatemala responsible for the forced disappearance of 14 people, the forced displacement of 7 people and their families (49 people in total) and “the violation of the rights to judicial guarantees and judicial protection against the relatives of the victims of the massacre, the victims of forced disappearance and their relatives, and the surviving victims of the massacre.” It also made recommendations to the State for reparations measures.¹⁹

Three years after the sentence, FAMDEGUA continues to work on

identifying victims. The I/A Court H.R.’s subsequent review of the sentence, published in November 2023, recognizes 76 surviving victims²⁰ and gives new momentum to the fight for compliance with the 2021 recommendations. FAMDEGUA members are disappointed that state institutions are not cooperating to comply with these recommendations: “We are really doing the investigation that the MP should be doing.” They have set about the task of “locating the relatives and taking statements about the events that each of them experienced.”

FAMDEGUA believes that the terrible impacts of the massacre are being passed on to the next generations, as the survivors and their children,

grandchildren and great-grandchildren continue to suffer from the lack of justice and live in very difficult conditions, all made worse by the lack of support from state institutions. In the face of this lack of response, many relatives of the survivors emigrated to Mexico and the United States in search of better living conditions. Even the I/A Court H.R., faced with the lack of reparations by the State, anticipated these consequences for future generations and, according to FAMDEGUA members, recognized them as victims “because they are still suffering the effects of forced displacement. It is no longer just the parents; it is also their children. The outlook for the families is very complex.”

¹⁹ I/A Court H.R., Op. Cit.

²⁰ I/A Court H.R., Case of the Village of Los Josefinos Massacre vs. Guatemala. Monitoring of Sentence Compliance in terms of Victim Accreditation, 28 Nov 2023.



“As victims, we ask that the sentence be carried out in full and that it be done soon because most of us victims are dying.” Visit to the cemetery of Los Josefinos, 25.10.2024

One of the survivors we were able to talk to highlighted the lack of support from state institutions and delays in the legal process: “The state has not bothered to set up search committees, and the MP has done even less to investigate the intellectual authors of the massacre. They appoint one prosecutor after another, and if a prosecutor makes a little progress in the investigation, they take him away and appoint another. They do it to obstruct justice.”

Despite all the obstacles and challenges, the survivors, along with organizations like FAMDEGUA and CEJIL, have mobilized to continue demanding that the State of Guatemala comply with the reparation measures.

“The memory of the massacre is painful and persistent”

Speaking about the impact of these horrendous events, one survivor explains that they were not only material,

but also psychosocial. She says that two of her children were killed and that she cannot cry, “there’s so much pain in my heart, I can’t let it go.” She suffers anxiety attacks and her whole body goes rigid. She shares that she likes the idea of making a documentary about the massacre, as mentioned in one of the recommendations, because she doesn’t want anything like what happened to her to ever happen again.

There is a total lack of medical and psychosocial support for the survivors, which the State has an obligation to provide. “They made a commitment to provide a psychologist to care for all the victims of the Josefinos. They had to meet this need, wherever the survivors were. But the psychologist is from another community health center and only comes once a week with the doctor, and the State claims that this is how it is fulfilling its commitment.” Furthermore, the I/A Court H.R. has ruled “against the State of Guatemala, pointing out its ineffectiveness in terms

of providing solutions and guaranteeing surviving victims’ right to justice.”

On top of all this, there are other problems affecting the community, such as land in the hands of soldiers, monocultures of teak trees and young people migrating to the United States in search of work and better living conditions. According to FAMDEGUA, “the same structures that continue to displace and dispossess people of their lands” are still in place. The recurring issue of land distribution and ownership and structural economic and social inequalities continue to persist and strongly impact the survivors. One community leader concludes that “before, you could grow anything, cassava, sweet potatoes, yams, pineapples... but now the rich have the land.” For all these reasons, the outlook for the families of the Josefinos is difficult and complex. The road to justice and a dignified life has been long and complicated, but together with FAMDEGUA they will continue to struggle to achieve it.

Sites of Memory to ensure Never Again:

reconstruction and non-repetition

“Sites of memory are there to say to society: yes, they lived; yes, they existed; and yes, the Guatemalan state committed these crimes against its own people even though it had a responsibility to protect their lives. For the families, it means reparation, dignity, receiving a minimum of justice, recognizing the truth that their loved one was indeed alive, that they were indeed murdered for defending human rights and seeking a dignified life: better wages, better education, land to farm and feed themselves, etc.”¹

For the last decade, the struggle for justice in Guatemala has been marked by landmark trials that have contributed to the recognition of the country’s historical memory. Sentences in cases like the Dos Erres massacre, the Spanish Embassy massacre, the Ixil Genocide, Sepur Zarco and Molina Theissen recognize some of the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan state’s high-ranking military commanders against their own population during the Internal Armed Conflict (IAC). However, the State has been extremely weak in terms of its obligation to deliver justice, recognize the truth, offer reparations and thus guarantee the non-repetition of atrocities like those committed during the IAC.

The achievements on the road to justice are due to victims/survivors’ organizations, which have carried out an enormous amount of work to break new ground. Part of this work has been to design and create sites that share this history. This work has often been led by these same organizations through initiatives in their own communities.

Throughout 2024, a year marked by major setbacks in transitional justice, primarily caused by efforts to obstruct legal proceedings,² we visited several sites of memory, which we will discuss throughout this article. For a society denied the right to memory and truth, these spaces are essential for raising awareness of the country’s recent and extremely bloody history, characterized by brutal state violence that destroyed lives, families, communities, cultural heritage and social fabrics. They are a way of educating new generations and thus contributing to the reconstruction of the country.



The Luis de Lión Project is located in the San Juan del Obispo community in Antigua Guatemala. In 2004, Mayarí de León, daughter of the Kaqchikel poet who was kidnapped and disappeared in 1984, turned the family home into a museum about the poet and educator’s life, a library and a school for the arts, thereby contributing to her father’s dream that all of the children of Guatemala have access to education and artistic training, saying, “He wanted there to be a library in every corner of the world.” The project’s main objectives are to turn children into ambassadors of peace and love of life, supporting them through reading, poetry, music and other forms of artistic expression, all steeped in gender equality and historical memory. It is a way of fighting different forms of inequality, racism, impunity and violence, structural problems in Guatemalan society, which thousands of men and women, kidnapped and disappeared during the Internal Armed Conflict, struggled against.*

Location: 4ta calle oriente #4 San Juan del Obispo, Guatemala.

Contact Information: +502 7830 6651; info@luisdelion.org

Website: <https://luisdelion.org>

Hours: Tuesday to Sunday, 10 to 16h

Tour: Q50.

1 Interview with Elisabeth Pedraza, coordinator of the human rights program of the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP), 05 Nov 2024.

2 See the article on the AJR in this Bulletin. In addition, the cases of CREOMPAZ, Diario Militar and Luz Leticia have faced a number of obstacles and setbacks.

* PBI Guatemala, The Power of Words: Luis de Lión’s Legacy and the Diario Militar - Death Squad Dossier - Case, PBI Guatemala, Bulletin 46, December 2021.

Schools at the museum

For Kaqchikel poet, writer and educator Luís de Lión, who was kidnapped and disappeared in 1984, children were “a blank sheet of paper on which to start writing a new story.”³ The poet’s vision coincides with museums’ approach to memory: one of their main objectives is to educate young people about the events of the IAC, using pedagogical methodologies to ensure that the issue is passed on to new generations. Andrea Plician, head of the House of Memory⁴ explains that, after the museum opened, teachers approached her looking for tools to address the issue in schools, as the formal education system does not provide for in-depth study of the IAC, despite the fact that several court rulings in recent years, including those in the Molina Theissen and Sepur Zarco cases, have demanded its inclusion. The House of Memory has responded to this need by offering courses for teachers which culminated in the development of a pedagogy of memory. It is thanks to the initiative of teachers themselves, taking their students to visit the museum, that something so transcendental is being brought into schools.

David Lajuj Cortez is the coordinator of the Rabinal Community Museum of Historical Memory, a town whose Achí people were severely affected by the violence. He explains that the museum is a regional model for addressing the topic of the IAC with students. They encourage schools and universities to visit their exhibition spaces. In addition to sharing the history of the IAC and recovering the memory of what happened, the museum addresses the impacts of violence on Achí culture, as well as the effects that the fear and silence inherited from the violence continue to have on Achí cultural and spiritual life.⁵

“There are many people who don’t know about this part of history. Often parents are unwilling to remember and talk about this history because it is very painful. So it is kept hidden and not shared with their sons and daughters.”

David Lajuj Cortez



The **Quetzaltenango Intercultural Park**, which has been in operation since 2004, holds a railway museum, a library, a sports park, conference facilities, venues for cultural events, and much more. At the beginning of this year, one of the basements was opened to the public as a Museum of Memory.

The Park is located in the old Altos railway station, which in 1945 was converted into the Manuel Lisandro Barillas Military Brigade, or Military Zone 17-15, and was used as a center for detention, torture and disappearance, such as in the cases of Emma Molina Theissen, Emeterio Toj and Efraín Bamacá.* Artist in residence Bryan Castro, along with a group of forensic science students, is dedicated to reviewing and preserving the site and its findings. They have found pieces of clothing, papers, bullets of different calibers, bones, an identity card, etc. – in short, evidence that speaks of the horrors experienced in this place. Likewise, in an area identified as a dungeon, there are installations on the wall and ceiling that appear to have been torture devices.** “The Museum seeks to raise awareness, provide an experience and promote understanding of past human rights violations, fostering an intergenerational dialogue in the space.”***

Location: 4ta calle between 19 and 21 avenida, Zone 3, Quetzaltenango.

Contact Information: 5874 8494 /
centrointerculturalquetgo@gmail.com

Website: <https://www.parqueintercultural.com/>

Hours: Monday to Friday, 8 to 16h; Saturday, 8 to 12h

3 Quoted by his daughter Mayarí de León, in: PBI Guatemala: The Power of Words: Luis de Lión’s Legacy and the Diario Militar - Death Squad Dossier - Case, PBI Guatemala, Bulletin 46, December 2021.

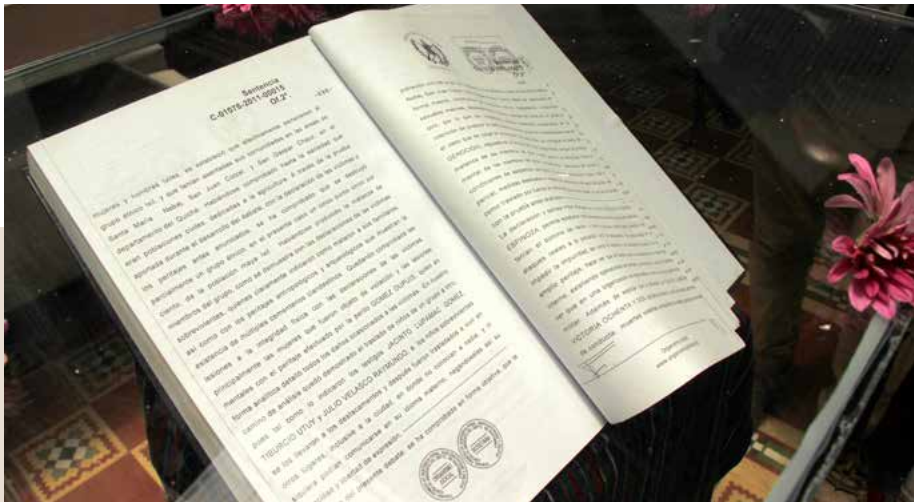
4 Interview with Andrea Méndez, 12 Nov 2024.

5 Interview with María Hortensia Lajuj, Assistant Director of the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence of the Verapaces, Maya Achí (ADIVIMA) and David Lajuj Cortez, 15 Oct 2024.

1 Parque Intercultural Quetzaltenango, Museo de la Memoria, website, accessed November 27, 2024.

2 Interview with Berenice Citá, Director of the Intercultural Centre, November 15, 2024.

3 Parque Intercultural Quetzaltenango, Op. Cit.



The Centre for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) was created to seek justice for the serious human rights violations perpetrated during the IAC. A milestone in this struggle was the Centre's work on behalf of victims in the Ixil Genocide case, which resulted in a historic genocide conviction in 2013. And though this sentence was overturned by the Constitutional Court ten days later, the case was retried and reached the same conclusion in 2018: YES, there was genocide. However, the Guatemalan state has failed to comply with reparation measures. As a result of the state's failure to comply, CALDH created a site of memory to raise awareness about the violence suffered by thousands of victims, as well as their strategies for survival, ensuring that they would not be forgotten. The testimonies of the IAC survivors, gathered during different events on racism and human rights, were the foundation for the initial phases of the Museum of Memory, which opened in February 2014 on 13th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenue.

A year later, the **Kaji Tulam House of Memory**, as the museum is called, moved to a more central location, one block from the Church of San Sebastián on 6th Avenue. New approaches are now included, like specific spaces dedicated to commemorating women and to illustrate different periods in which the structural social, economic and political problems that define the country's history were in the making. Young guides, trained at the House of Memory, explain the events and invite visitors to reflect on the structural causes of the IAC: racism, violence and inequality which, in some regions, culminated in genocides against Indigenous Maya peoples. Far from having disappeared, these problems remain present; violence is clearly a constant in Guatemalan history. But the focus is not only on different forms of violence, but also on recognizing and valuing the resistance that existed, exists and will continue to exist as long as these problems persist.

The museum also hosts temporary exhibitions, as well as artistic and cultural activities, talks, book launches, etc. During the COVID era, the House of Memory created a virtual exhibition that can still be visited on its website. It also offers a mobile exhibition, which can be taken to schools, as well as public activities in streets and town squares.

Location: 6 avenida 1-71, Zone 1, Guatemala City.

Contact Information: +502 3054 1265 / casadelamemoria@caldh.org.gt

Website: <https://casadelamemoria.org.gt/>

Hours: Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 13h and 14 to 17h.

“In the footsteps of our ancestors”

The Katinamit Museum of the Poqomchi' Community Educational Center (CECEP) in San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, is a center for training, inspiration, reflection, advocacy, outreach and reinterpretation of the history and memories of the Maya people. The center trains young people to be community guides and peace promoters, and they pass on their knowledge to the students who visit the museum. They explain what the Poqomchi' culture was like and how our ancestors counted time according to their indigenous cosmivision. The Hall of Martyrs honors and dignifies the memory of those murdered during the IAC and bears witness to their lives as leaders committed to solidarity and community work. The museum also pays special tribute to women elders who survived the violence, strong women whose lives and memories are shared through audiovisual media and a photographic exhibition featuring their faces. Henry Cal Jul, coordinator of the historical and ancestral memory process, explains that the museum, conceived of as an educational space, is constantly working to enrich its museography. Recently, the guardian animals of the nahuales have been incorporated in the Hall of the Martyrs. According to the Mayan worldview, they continue to accompany the spirits in the underworld. To recover ancestral memory, they have encouraged young people's recognition of sacred and ceremonial sites in and around the municipality. These sites can always be visited by anyone who wants to learn about indigenous culture.⁶

6 Interview with Henry Cal Jul, 17 Oct 2024.



The **Rabinal Community Museum of Historical Memory** was founded in 2000 by a group of men and women who had survived the IAC, with the goal of preserving the historical memory of the more than 5,000 victims from the municipality of Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. The victims belonged to the Achí people and were mostly massacred and disappeared between 1980 and 1984. The search process undertaken by the families was very difficult. They went through the municipal records with photos of identity cards and found 324 cases of adult victims. However, there were no photos of the children, so they could only recover some 260 names, which can be read on the walls of the museum.

This museum offers a space that “reflects on the memory of our ancestors who were victims” and allows people to “reunite with their

murdered and disappeared relatives.” The goal is to make younger generations aware of these events so that they never happen again.

One of the rooms is dedicated to the dignification of the victims. Photomurals depict the search process, which begins with the legal complaint and continues with the identification of possible clandestine graveyards and the legal procedures and authorizations needed to carry out excavations and exhumations of human remains. These exhumations are processes supported by the families and communities. Once the exhumation has been carried out, the skeletal remains are identified using DNA tests taken from family members. And finally, a ceremony is held to reunite the families, in which the remains are returned to the families, there is a vigil for the deceased, and they are given a dignified burial to honor their memory. This creates a place where the family can visit them.

The museum also shows other ways of preserving and dignifying the memory of

loved ones, such as establishing dates for commemorations.

In another room, the cultural and spiritual expressions of the Achí culture are on display: clothing, musical instruments, dances, crafts, textiles, sacred places, ceremonial elements, etc. It also highlights the important community roles of traditional midwives, healers and *ajq'ij* (spiritual guides), who are essential for community life and the Achí worldview, which have been strongly affected by the violence. The damage caused has been so great that some of the elders are reluctant to pass on their knowledge due to the fear instilled in them by the violence they experienced during the IAC.

The museum is run by the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence of the Verapaces, Maya Achí (ADIVIMA) and has a library, documentaries and interactive research and investigation tools. There are also activities and methodologies to encourage visitors to engage in reflection and the museum organizes intergenerational dialogues.



Location: 2ª. Calle, 4a. Avenida, Zone 3, Rabinal, Baja Verapaz.
Contact Information: 7938 8721 / subdireccion@adivima.org.gt
Facebook Page: Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica, Rabinal
Hours: Monday to Friday, 8 to 17h. (closed for lunch from 13 to 14h)

In 2022, the **María and Antonio Goubaud Foundation (MAG)** began to implement the vision of the now defunct International Institute of Learning for Social Reconciliation (IIARS). For a decade, IIARS offered a tour at the Railway Museum in Guatemala City entitled “Why Are We the Way We Are?”, which took visitors on a tour of Guatemalan history to explain the country’s present. IIARS entrusted the idea of creating “Memory Tours” to the MAG Foundation, which rose to the challenge, designed the tours and trained the first generation of guides. In 2022, the first certificate program was held, which some 40 people of different genders, ages, ethnicities, life experiences and academic disciplines participated in. It was a process of continuous mutual learning.

Sadi Car is one of those memory guides, who recalls that “initially we designed a route at the University of San Carlos (USAC) since there are many sites of memory located there. However, given the situation that was unfolding there [the occupation of the USAC President’s Office],



Photo: Courtesy Fundación MAG

we had to change the route and move it to the historic center. We discovered that there were many important sites related to student and popular movements, so we remained in the historic center.” They currently offer five memory routes with different areas of focus.

The creation of these routes was a collective effort that emerged from the stories that each course participant contributed. In the historic center there are many places to discover and remember with their own history. For example, the Paraninfo and the USAC Museum (MUSAC) are important for the student movement. The participants in the two certificate courses that have been offered thus far sought, investigated and located plaques about events that took place on these sites. They also gathered information about certain people who do not have a specific place dedicated to their memory, so they identified places where

those people spent their time or where something significant happened in their lives.

These tours last about three hours. They begin with a meeting at the MAG Foundation where the participants get to know one another. Then the group visits six to eight sites where the guides share stories of people’s lives and struggles, as well as the historical context in which the people lived. At the end of the walk, the group meets back up at the MAG Foundation to share what they have learned and how it made them feel.

They plan to open another training program for volunteer memory guides by 2025. It will be an open call. One future challenge they face is the decentralization of the initiative, in order to support the creation of such routes in other parts of the country, though some do already exist in certain regions.

Location: 8 Calle 3-51, zona 1, Ciudad de Guatemala.

Contact Information: 2298-3398 / recorridos@fundacionmag.org

Website: <https://fundacionmag.org/>

More information about the Memory Tours on the Facebook page: Fundación María y Antonio Goubaud Carrera

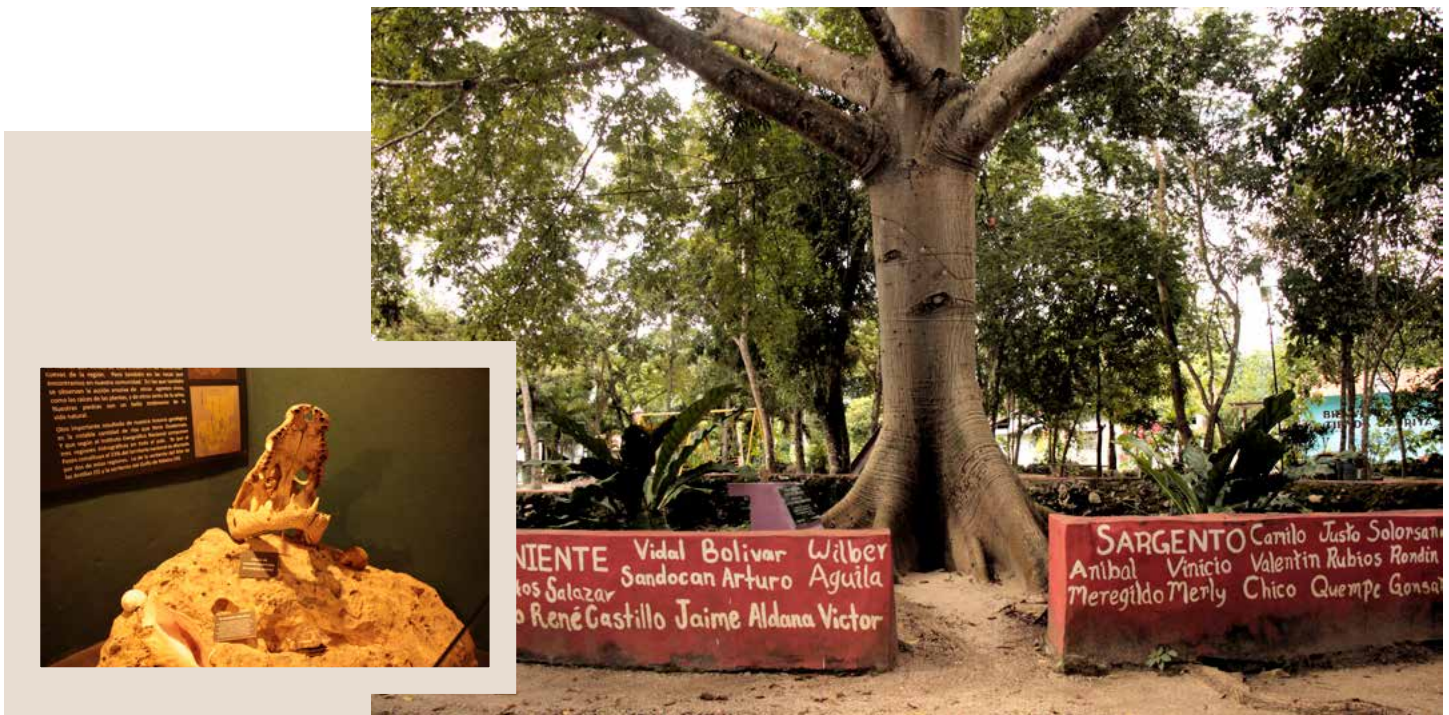
The **Katinamit Museum Poqomchi' Community Educational Center** in San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, came about as a local initiative to preserve and promote Poqomchi' culture in the municipality. Through a community effort, objects were collected from the region, including everyday tools used to work in the fields and in the home, traditional clothing and archaeological objects found in the area. A permanent exhibition was set up with all these objects.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the people who started this project turned their attention to the issue of historical memory of the IAC, particularly the case of the clandestine graveyard found at the army base in Cobán, now known as CREOMPAZ. There, the remains of more than 500 people who were kidnapped and disappeared in and around San Cristóbal were found. The museum has a specific room dedicated to the memory of these people, showing how they had contributed to community life throughout their lives. The museum also has a special area dedicated to women survivors of different types of violence, presenting their testimonies and life stories.

In recent years, the museum has trained around 25 young people to be community guides and peace promoters. Their role is to convey historical and ancestral memory to the general public, with a special emphasis on the region's schoolchildren, encouraging them to visit the museum regularly and learn about the region's sacred and ancestral sites.

Location: 0 calle 0-33 zona 3, Calle del Calvario in San Cristóbal Verapaz, Alta Verapaz.
Contact Information: 7950 4896.
Facebook Page: Memoria Histórica y Ancestral.
Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:30 to 17h





Nuevo Horizonte is a community of former Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) combatants, who organized as a cooperative in 1998, after the signing of the peace accord. Those who founded the community and the cooperative created the **Nuevo Horizonte Museum** because they wanted to share the history of their struggle with future generations and the general public. The first initiative came about in 2015 at a meeting where the founders shared memories, photos and objects in a classroom at the popular education school. However, this exhibition was somewhat damaged by the weather, which led a group of youths to try to improve the conditions. This was made possible thanks to support from Canada (through AMICOS) and the museum expertise of the artist and archivist Marlon García. Both undertook the task of constructing a building and designing themed rooms for the exhibition. In seeking the origins of the “Horizonte” identity, they identified and studied stages of geological history, ancient Maya history, the periods of the country’s political history that led to the IAC and up to the post-war period. The main room is dedicated to the cooperative founders’ important struggles during the IAC and in post-conflict civilian life.

“We set up the museum so that our founders’ struggle, history, and processes are not forgotten and can serve as a lesson, a learning experience for ourselves and our children,

as well as for children and young people from outside the community,” said Adelaida Ramírez Girón.

A group of youths underwent five years of training that enabled them to set up the museum, which opened two years ago. The content was created through intergenerational and participatory processes with the founders sharing their stories, despite the pain that remembering the war caused them. “All the content was approved in assemblies with the community’s founders.”

The best example of the cooperative’s dedication, commitment and perseverance is the tour of the “Forest of Life,” which covers 116 hectares, with several trails to follow, as well as camping facilities. This is a guided tour during which they share stories of their experiences as guerrillas, like how their knowledge about different plants’ benefits made survival in the jungle possible. Nature was therefore a key ally in protecting them from the army’s ferocious attacks in those years. “The jungle saved our lives, so now we have to save the jungle.”

The Nuevo Horizonte Community is located at km 443 on the road to Flores. They offer lodging, a restaurant and guided visits to the museum, the jungle, the lagoon and several of their projects.

Contact Information: +502 4476 5347 / turismo8comunitariocnh1998@gmail.com

Facebook: Museo Nuevo Horizonte.

Website: <https://www.cooperativa-nuevohorizonte.org/>

Museum hours: 8 to 16h; Admission Q35.



Landscapes of Memory is the first site of memory located in a place where part of the terrible violence that characterized Guatemala's IAC was perpetrated, including detentions, forced disappearances and torture. The site is a former military detachment that was turned into a clandestine cemetery and later reclaimed by the National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA).

The organization, founded by widows, many from the Comalapa region, who have been searching for their missing relatives for decades, filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office in 2003 to investigate the area, which resulted in the opening of a legal case and a series of exhumations. From August 2003 to December 2005, the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) carried out excavations and found 53 graves with 220 skeletons* of people showing signs of violence.** CONAVIGUA coordinator Rosalina Tuyuc says of the findings: "Our dead have spoken. Every time a clandestine grave is opened, they are the ones who speak. When we find them blindfolded, with their mouths shut, with their hands and feet tied."

In the years following the exhumations, CONAVIGUA decided to buy the land and turn it into a site of memory, "dedicated to all the victims of forced disappearance in Guatemala. This is a Site of Dignity and Reparation for the families who have not stopped searching."*** In the center of the site we find the Nimajay, the Big House, a tribute to the victims of Comalapa. Its exterior walls are decorated with paintings that depict the testimonies of those who suffered the violence, as well as Mother Earth who sheltered them; the walls also show elements of the Maya Cosmovision.

Landscapes of Memory was inaugurated and opened to the public on June 21, 2018, the National Day against Forced Disappearance. The 220 skeletons that were found are buried here; those who were identified have their names there. The Wall of the Disappeared lists and commemorates more than 6,000 disappeared people reported to FAFG over the course of its work in Guatemala. In the center of the wall is a monument to Dr. Clyde Collins Snow, the forensic anthropologist who promoted the creation of FAFG and who asked to be buried alongside the victims of the Guatemalan IAC.

Location: Kilometer 77.5 Carretera a San Juan Comalapa, Paraje Palabor, Comalapa, Chimaltenango, Guatemala.

Visit by booking in advance at: <https://memorialcomalapa.org>

* By April 2024, FAFG had managed to identify 85 people thanks to its DNA database.

** <https://memorialcomalapa.org/>

*** Ibid.

Memory Tours

The María y Antonio Goboud (MAG) Foundation, located behind the National Library, in the center of Guatemala City, also promotes the training of memory guides as a collective process. The guides design tours and thus reclaim sites of memory in the historic center of the capital.

Sadi Car, memory guide at the MAG Foundation,⁷ explains that they have met young people who do not know their history; when they are told about the recent history of their country “it is as if they were hearing it for the first time.” Not even the students at the University of San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC), whose campus is marked by references to the student struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, know about the repression suffered by their predecessors. “We have met people who have never even visited Zone 1. For some it is difficult to understand what it means to reclaim public space and to understand why a space is contested, to understand the dispute over the truth, the struggle for justice, for finding the disappeared.” In the last two years, some 1,500 people have participated in the memory tours.

“The education system is one of the sectors that most refuses to acknowledge the truth, so one of our aspirations is for public establishments to get involved in our tours. We have seen more openness in private secondary schools, where students already come with some knowledge, but that is not the case in public schools.”

“The idea is for the right to memory to become normalized and recognized by everyone”

Sadi Car

In the meetings that followed the tours, “we met visitors for whom it was a suffocating experience, as the past continues to be a taboo in society, but also in families. For example, it is common for there to be a disappeared family member but for the family not to talk about it.”

“Activism is not a crime”

Elisabeth Pedraza, coordinator of the human rights program of the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP), has observed that family members live with the stigma that the disappeared or murdered person was “involved in something.” “In military discourse, activism was associated with crime. If you subverted the established order and did not accept the established norms, you were committing a crime, you were a criminal; and nobody wanted to be a criminal, because you were left alone. So, they disappeared your family member and you did nothing because you thought he had been a criminal and that the State had taken him away for being subversive. That has caused divisions in those same families. Nothing can be blamed on the State, it’s like the relationship between father and son, it’s a replica: the child has to subordinate himself to the highest authority, it’s a very vertical, patriarchal way of thinking, of total submission, very militarized. And we still have that in society, a fairly militarized structure; I have to be told what to do and that limits the possibility of cultivating your own abilities. It’s better to conform and you end up saying

“let the authority figure tell me what to do”, that limits your capacity for thought and critical analysis; your critical thinking is overridden.

Marlon García, artist, archivist and museologist, questions the silence and the invisibilization of the lives of murdered and disappeared people: “It is worrying that museums sometimes overemphasize the idea of the victim, an eternal victimization. However, people were not only victims, so it is very important to ask what they did with their lives, how they responded to the army’s repression, what they did to survive and what victories they were proud of in the midst of so much violence.”⁸

“They are not just numbers, they are not just names, they are people with qualities, histories, dreams and, of course, flaws too. The disappeared are human beings like us and that is why they must be made visible as such. If these wounds are not healed, it is impossible for Guatemala to build peace.”

Mayarí de León

Gabriela Escobar, anthropologist and lecturer at the Rafael Landívar University (URL) specializing in processes of memory around the war in Guatemala, agrees with Marlon García. She insists that another step must be taken in the journey towards sites of memory, to move away from a focus on victims and suffering and to move towards celebrating struggles and victories, towards recognizing and vindicating activism, as the organization HIJOS has been doing since its founding in 1999. “The imposed stigmatization, silence and fear have prevented the disappeared from being recognized as the country’s heroes and heroines,

⁷ Interview with Sadi Car, 27 Sep 2024.

⁸ Interview with Marlon García, curator of the Nuevo Horizonte Museum, Nuevo Horizonte, Santa Ana, Petén, 03 Dec 2024.

since thousands of them were part of activism struggling to improve the living conditions of the Guatemalan people, who for centuries have lived in misery and without rights in a state ruled by economic interests.” “Nothing can justify the State’s disappearance and murder of these people, because in any case, if the people in question committed any crime, the State should have guaranteed them a fair trial. A state has no justification for taking the lives of its own people.”⁹ Both Marlon and Gabriela point out that international aid has also contributed to perpetuating the focus on the victims and they believe this should change.

The struggle for memory continues, it is not something that has already been won, as Sadi Car of the MAG Foundation points out: “When we finished the certificate program, we found out that the military veterans had started their own course on their memory at the Francisco Marroquín University. What we have learned is that there is not just ONE memory, but different memories; just as we defend our memories, they defend theirs. Memory is under constant dispute, as is public space.”

In the context of this dispute over memory, we cannot ignore the repeated attacks these places have suffered. Mayarí de León has reported that the plaque commemorating the disappearance of her father, the poet Luís de León, has been repeatedly destroyed with a hammer. The plaque is located at 2nd Avenue and 11th Street in Zone 1 of Guatemala City, the place where he was abducted. For her, each time the plaque is vandalized it is as if they had disappeared him again, “as if they would symbolically disappear him.”

The same thing happened recently with another commemorative plaque in the streets of downtown Guatemala City. The plaque read: “The parks, the university classrooms, the Guatemalan



streets, are witnesses to the relentless struggles, the love, the solidarity and the smiles of thousands of university students. Because they gave their lives in search of a dignified Guatemala with social justice: Héctor Interiano, Carlos Cuevas, Gustavo Castañón and many, many more are PRESENT! ALIVE TODAY AND FOREVER! With the hearts of their families in the history and in the noble sentiments of the people of Guatemala.

Forcibly disappeared between May 15 and 21, 1984.” Through a settlement with the State, this plaque was erected at the request of the family members of the disappeared young people, to commemorate their lives cut short by the Guatemalan State. In August of this year it was destroyed. The families replaced it on the Day of the Martyrs of San Carlos, held on the afternoon of October 30. The next morning it was

9 Interview with Gabriela Escobar, Guatemala, 30 Dec 2024.

destroyed again; there is no record of an investigation being opened.¹⁰

These reprehensible acts – which, according to some of the people we interviewed for this article, have also occurred on the University of San Carlos campus over the last year – are encouraged by situations such as obstruction of trials and sentencing, or worse still, the total denial of justice, as in the case of the fourth trial for the Dos Erres massacre last year. This environment fosters impunity so that shadowy forces can vandalize sites that recognize the serious crimes committed by the state during the IAC.

According to Elisabeth Pedraza, the State should promote and protect the sites of memory and, consequently, accept its own responsibility as an apparatus of the State, since responsibility is inherited. There is a legacy that the State must assume, a historical responsibility towards its people. The State has the obligation to preserve these spaces and ensure that they are not destroyed but maintained, because they provide a sense of healing for families and Guatemalan society as a whole.



The columns of the Cathedral located in the center of Guatemala City, house the names of thousands of victims of the CAI, collected in the Report of the Interdiocesan Project “Recovery of Historical Memory” (REHMI). Nearby is the Monseñor Juan Gerardi Memory Center, whose objective is to preserve and disseminate Gerardi’s legacy. Within its archives are more than 5,000 testimonies collected by the REHMI. A visit to this center is possible upon request. More information: <https://www.odhag.org.gt/cmmjg/> and <https://www.remhi.org.gt/portal/>

Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala
Location: 6th Street 7-70, Zone 1, Gate #2, Guatemala City,
Contact: centrogerardi@odhag.org.gt / (+502) 2256-7413



10 Álvarez Nájera, L., Recuerdan a desaparecidos sancarlistas, Agencia Ocode, 31 Oct 2024.

News of our Work:

Accompaniment of the Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR)



Accompaniment of one of the almost 100 audiences in this case, 20.06.2024

The Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR) is a coalition of survivors from 22 communities in five regions of the country – Ixil and Ixcán (Quiché), Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango and Rabinal (Baja Verapaz) – who endured a scorched earth policy from 1978 to 1985. The organization was established in April 2000 to bring genocide charges against the military governments of Romeo Lucas García and Efraín

Ríos Montt, in order to seek justice for the multiple human rights violations they suffered: massacres, murders, torture, rape, forced displacement, destruction of their livelihoods and way of life, etc.

On May 10, 2013, High Risk Court A delivered a verdict in the first Ixil Genocide trial, which took place in the country,

with the AJR acting as joint plaintiff. This sentence represented a milestone in the history of Guatemala and the world:¹ the former de facto president José Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983) was found guilty as the person responsible for the genocide of the Ixil people committed by the Armed Forces under his command.²

The second genocide case

In October 2019, a new criminal case was opened, this time against four members of the military high command of Romeo Lucas García's de facto government (1978-1982): Benedicto Lucas García, Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas, César Octavio Noguera Argueta, and Luis René Mendoza Palomo.

The four were accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and forced disappearances against the Maya Ixil people. At the trial, which finally began in April of this year, only Benedicto Lucas García was prosecuted, because Callejas was declared mentally

incompetent and will have to face a special trial, while the latter two died.³ At the start of 2024, the AJR board asked PBI for accompaniment throughout the oral and public hearing phase.

Over the course of almost 100 hearings held in 2024,⁴ the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP) and the plaintiff AJR, represented by lawyers from the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) and the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala (ODHAG), presented 71 testimonies (including from 11 women survivors of sexual violence), 42 forensic expert reports, 13 expert reports from other disciplines, military and civilian documents from the relevant period and the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) report, as well as international court rulings on crimes against humanity. In their statements and during the closing arguments, the MP's Human Rights Prosecutor and the joint plaintiff presented the events that took place between August 1981 and March 1982 and demonstrated that crimes had been committed, requesting

a sentence of "30 years for the crime of genocide, 30 years for crimes against humanity and 40 years for each forced disappearance, 70 proven cases, for a total of 2860 years."⁵

"The fear of a guilty verdict made them ask for favors from corrupt actors committed to preserving impunity"⁶

However, on November 14, at the end of three days of closing arguments by defense counsel, provided by the Institute of Public Criminal Defense (IDPP), the defense informed the judge that they had been notified of an injunction granted to Lucas García, recusing the judges. Finally, on November 26, the First Appeals Court held a court date to hear from the parties and rule on the injunction. The president of the court, Miriam Regina Brolo, and judges Marco Tulio Pérez Lemus and Jorge Emilio Quezada Morales concluded that "the court showed partiality and bias in favor of the MP and the plaintiffs" and that another court should therefore be assigned to hear the case.

According to the plaintiffs' attorney Jovita Tzul, the military official's defense did not offer any evidence to prove the High Risk Court judges' bias. Likewise, Nery Rodenas, director of ODHAG, which provides legal support to the AJR, stated that the judges' decision is a "slap in the face" from the justice system to the victims who "have had to wait more than 40 years for a sentence."⁷

On December 10, the plaintiff AJR filed an appeal on this ruling.⁸



- 1 For the first time ever, a head of state was tried and convicted of genocide in his own country.
- 2 Just 10 days after the sentence was handed down, a decision by the Constitutional Court ordered a retrial. This retrial began in January 2015 and ended in September 2018, again concluding that genocide had taken place. By then, defendant Ríos Montt had been dead for five months, and the second defendant, General José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez, former director of military intelligence, was acquitted once again.
- 3 Impunity Watch, Caso de genocidio contra el Pueblo Ixil durante la dictadura militar de Lucas García, Guatemala, 12 Mar 2020; Impunity Watch, El juicio contra Benedicto Lucas por el Genocidio del Pueblo Maya Ixil, Guatemala, Nov 2024.
- 4 All the hearings can be watched on the Asociación Verdad y Justicia Facebook page.
- 5 Pérez, R., Abogada de víctimas señala que hubo una intención genocida en contra del pueblo Ixil, Prensa Comunitaria, 8.11.2024.
- 6 Nota de Prensa: AJR y ODHAG, a la opinión pública nacional e internacional, 28.11.2024.
- 7 Pérez, R., Sala Primera de Mayor Riesgo anula el juicio por genocidio contra Benedicto Lucas García, Prensa Comunitaria, 28.11.2024.
- 8 García, O. y Vargas, E., Presentan amparo contra resolución que suspendió el juicio contra Benedicto Lucas García, Prensa Libre, 10.12.2024.

PBI is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) which provides international accompaniment and observation at the request of threatened social organizations. The presence of international volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence.

PBI in Guatemala

PBI maintained a team of volunteers in Guatemala from 1983 to 1999. During those years, it carried out accompaniment work with human rights organizations, unions, indigenous and campesino organizations, refugees and churches. In 1999, after an evaluation process, it was decided to close the project since the country had greatly advanced in the opening of space for the work of human rights organizations. Nevertheless, **PBI** continued attentive to the happenings in Guatemala through a follow-up committee.

From the middle of 2000, **PBI** began receiving a number of requests for international accompaniment. Due to these requests, PBI carried out an investigation in the field that made evident a turn in the direction and a losing of space for human rights defenders. In April of 2002, **PBI** decided to reopen the Guatemala Project in order to carry out international accompaniment and observation in coordination with other international accompaniment and observation in coordination with other international accompaniment NGOs. In April 2003, the new **PBI** office was opened in Guatemala.

Purpose and principles

Contribute to improve the human rights situation in Guatemala and accompany social and political processes that promote the enhancement of democracy and participation in the country and the region. To attain this, PBI employs an international presence that supports the maintenance and opening of political and social spaces for human rights defenders, organizations and other social expressions facing repression due to their work supporting human rights.

PBI follows the principles of non-violence, non-partisanship and non-interference.



PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL GUATEMALA PROJECT



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**Agència Catalana
de Cooperació
al Desenvolupament**

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