



PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL
GUATEMALA PROJECT



Bulletin No.

53

- 2 The 40th Anniversary of GAM, an Inspiration in the Struggle for Human Rights in Guatemala
- 10 The struggle for the right to water on the southern coast: “Water is life, not a commodity”
- 17 News of our Work: A New Historic Sentence in the Maya Achí Women’s case: Perpetrators Convicted of Crimes Against Humanity Committed in the Form of Sexual Violence

The 40th Anniversary of GAM,

an Inspiration in the Struggle for Human Rights in Guatemala

“During the Mejía Víctores era, terrible things were happening both in the capital and in the countryside. Anyone who opposed the regime was detained, disappeared, or killed. Every day was truly hellish. In the morning, someone would be killed; in the afternoon, more people would be detained, disappeared, or kidnapped; and at night, we would bury more bodies. The situation in the capital became truly horrifying because it was a specific operation by General Mejía Víctores, a purge to wipe out what he considered to be the last remnants of the intellectual left: students, professors, and union leaders.” That is how Nineth Montenegro, one of the founders of the Mutual Support Group (GAM), recalls the political context in Guatemala in the 1980s.¹

Searching for their loved ones

“In that context, on February 18, 1984, my husband, Edgar Fernando García, was one of the thousands of people detained and disappeared. He was a student at the engineering department of the University of San Carlos and a worker at the CAVISA glass factory. Because of the tragic situation we found ourselves in, we took action [together with her mother-in-law, María Emilia García] and searched for him in different places, different prisons, different areas, requesting appointments and interviews. And that’s how we got to know other people who were in the same situation as us. In cemeteries, in prisons, in public spaces where bodies were found...that’s how we got to know other women, other families, and we thought that instead of acting individually, it would be better to act together to support one another and stand up for one another. And that’s what we did, and that’s how the Mutual Support Group (GAM) came into being on June 4, about three months after my husband’s disappearance.”

Thus, GAM became the first organization to publicly condemn the state for the arrests and disappearances that were being carried out, which totaled 45,000, according to the Commission for



Sara Poroj Vásquez and Nineth Montenegro at one of the many demonstrations in the 1980s. Courtesy of GAM.

Historical Clarification (CEH), including 5,000 children.

Valentina Agustín and Jorge Hernández are the parents of Luz Leticia, who was disappeared on her 25th birthday on November 22, 1982. They have also been part of GAM from the beginning. Mirtala, one of Luz Leticia’s sisters, remembers how her father and mother searched for her in many institutions: they went to the morgue, the Roosevelt Hospital, the courts. During their search,

they met other people who were also looking for their relatives. She shared, “That’s how they met. Despite my mother’s lack of education, she had to get involved in this struggle. She couldn’t stop, because she had to find Leti. And over time, my father learned all the stories of the other people who were searching: who they were looking for and the circumstances in which their loved ones disappeared. They looked for ways to contribute to this struggle.

¹ PBI Guatemala, ACÉRCATE with Nineth Montenegro, 26 Jun 2024.

For example, my mother cooked food for the meetings.”²

Sara Poroj Vásquez was 24 years old and lived with her three children, aged 5, 4, and 3, in the Castillo Lara neighborhood of Zone 7. May 9, 1984 was the last day she saw her husband, Jorge Humberto Granados Hernández, 28 years old. “At around 9 p.m., they arrived at my house. I went to the door and saw them dragging my husband toward a white jeep and taking him away. There were bloodstains left on the street.” An hour before this incident, strangers arrived at their house, knocked on the door, searched the house, and took items, documents, and clothing belonging to her husband. They questioned her about his whereabouts.

“The next day they took me away, blindfolded me, put me in a car, made me climb down some steps, sat me on a cold metal slab. I was in my nightgown, and they asked me about my husband. I told them I didn’t live with him, that I lived alone. In the end, they didn’t do anything to me, and the next day they left me at my house. They told me not to report it so that nothing would happen to me.”³

Jorge Humberto was a baker and a member of a bakery workers’ union. He was organizing with them to demand better wages, “that’s why they disappeared him.” He was very active in the union, participated in protests, and was already aware of several disappearances. “He told me not to look

for him if they took him away because I would never find him.” Sara did not listen to him and began a search that took her to hospitals and morgues. One day she heard an announcement on the radio inviting people who were looking for missing relatives to file a report at the GAM office. That is how she met them, without knowing that she would devote her life to this struggle. She became a member of the organization and continues to participate in its activities to this day.

PBI’s accompaniment

Shortly after it was founded, GAM requested a meeting with Peace Brigades International (PBI), an international organization that had been



GAM meeting at PBI's house, 1985. Courtesy of GAM.

² Interview with Valentina Agustín, Marta and Mirtala Hernández Agustín, Guatemala, 25 Mar 2025.

³ Interview with Sara Poroj Vásquez, Guatemala, 29 Apr 2025.

working in the country for a year. The meeting took place at PBI's office. Nineth recalled her first encounter with the organization, saying, "I had heard about Peace Brigades—this is a very important topic for me—I think it was through the US embassy, because I went to the embassy and they told me about an organization called Peace Brigades. They gave me the address, and I went there. I took them a letter explaining my situation and asking for moral support in rescuing my husband. This was before the Mutual Support Group was formed."

At that time, Peace Brigades had no clearly defined working methodology, as the organization was in the process of understanding the social struggles in the country so they could identify how exactly to support activists who were risking their lives to speak out against human rights violations committed by the government, which was militarized at the time. Thus began PBI's response to the needs expressed by the Guatemalan people, who were suffering violence at the hands of the state during that bloody period in Guatemala's history.

"When the Mutual Support Group was formed, we didn't have a meeting place, so we would meet at Peace Brigades. For several years, GAM held its meetings at Peace Brigades, where we would talk to people about what actions to take to find the disappeared alive. The space served as our office, where we filed our complaints and our requests, planned our marches, and kept files on all the people who came to us. Because it was not just people from the capital who were coming, but also many people from the countryside, from rural areas, especially from Quiché, Chimaltenango, and Alta Verapaz, places that had been devastated by the violence and repression of those years. And so we began to take on cases, not just our own, but also those of all the people who had been victims of violence during the internal armed conflict."

"Later, in addition to providing physical space, Peace Brigades contributed a lot by accompanying us at marches and demonstrations. They had a very mystical attitude, a strong commitment to pacifism inspired by Gandhi, and they put their own bodies on the line. When people wanted to beat us during a march, they would stand in front of us and form a shield... that was invaluable. They dared to attack us, but when they saw that there was a foreigner present, they stopped. The systematic accompaniment of all the marches, protests, walks, and vigils organized by the GAM provided invaluable support."



GAM demonstration accompanied by PBI, 1985. Courtesy of GAM.

Keeping alive the memory of the violations committed during the internal armed conflict

GAM's archive was created with the organization's founding in 1984. Through radio announcements, GAM's founders told the public that they could report disappeared family members. Thus, they began creating an archive with all the cases that came their way. Carlos Juárez,¹ the organization's lawyer and head of the Archive for the past 15 years, highlights the magnitude of forced disappearances at that time, saying, "In just the first year, 200 families of disappeared persons joined the GAM," despite the danger that doing so entailed. "They realized that it was a phenomenon that was happening everywhere, because people were coming from all over the country to share their stories and file complaints; it was a policy of war. And it was an indiscriminate practice, used against girls, boys, the elderly, women, and men. It became a weapon of war that tore many people from their homes, people who are still missing today, although their family members' memories of them remain alive."

Delving deeper into the unique nature of the GAM Archive, Carlos shared, "[The archive] comes directly from the victims; these are the firsthand accounts of people who suffered human rights violations. The archive is a vital tool for historical clarification, for example in trials, but also for other activities aimed at preserving memory and dignifying the lives of the disappeared. An archive like GAM's is important because it preserves the living testimony of those who suffered the consequences of the armed conflict."

The Archive is not closed to the public; rather, it can be visited by researchers,

1 Interview with Carlos Juárez, Guatemala, 25 Apr 2025.



Case file of Jorge Humberto Granados Hernandez, husband of Sara Poroj, Guatemala, 29.04.2025.

journalists, and family members. “The MP, through the investigations carried out by the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights, is our main user. Every week, they send us requests for information, and we respond to them as best we can.”

“Every year, people still come to share their stories or search for their loved ones. Second- and third-generation victims continue to search for their loved ones: their grandparents, aunts, uncles, mothers... This shows that talking about this issue, bringing the trauma of forced disappearance in Guatemala to light, is needed to heal this society. And we all need to understand that this can never happen to anyone ever again.”

“An archive is a source of history and a guarantee of truth. And this Archive, more than anything else, is extremely human, as it contains highly sensitive information. That is why it is important that it be preserved, safeguarded, and widely known.”

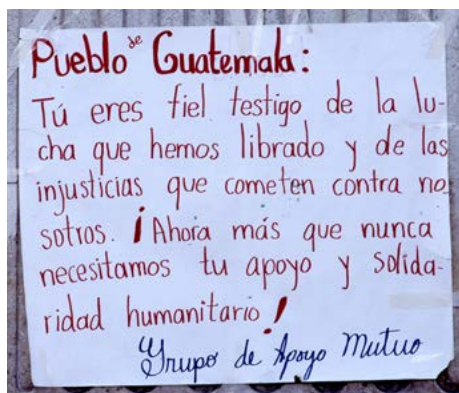
Archival work in Guatemala was spurred by the discovery and eventual recovery of the National Police Historical Archive (AHPN) in 2005. The people who began this work helped create university

degree programs in archival studies and promote recognition of the importance of archives in a variety of fields. This has been essential in the judicial sphere, for example, since evidence gathered from expert reports on AHPN documents has been included in many cases. Carlos recalls how people from the AHPN visited the GAM archives, saying, “They assessed the situation and told us that we had something valuable that we needed to start working to preserve. With their advice on how to get started, we took the first steps and began to seek support. We gradually found our way. We currently have at least 70 linear meters of information that’s been preserved to some degree. We’ve digitized 8.5 linear meters of information and have made significant progress in describing and classifying almost 45 meters.” The Archive continues to grow because, given the difficulties in obtaining justice in the country in recent years, “we have decided to preserve the Archive, because we also know that trials do not always progress as we would like. But an archive that preserves people’s living testimonies is a way to help bring closure to many families who are still grieving. I’m not saying that this is the answer, but we have heard people say: the fact that you have information,

three or four pages about my father’s life, brings me great comfort and joy because it means that he has not been forgotten, that he continues to live and that there is still a place where it can be proven, on a few sheets of paper, that he existed and what happened to him.”

The archive maintained by GAM has not been immune to attacks: twice, there have been thefts, which reduced its size. Carlos explains that “these types of archives face risks from the powerful forces that remain in Guatemala. Within the state, there are power structures that were responsible for and perpetrated human rights violations and that continue to wield a certain amount of influence in the justice system.”

“Right now, the MP is co-opted by groups that seek to erase history. In the past few years, the MP has obstructed and stalled transitional justice proceedings that seek to prosecute serious, widespread human rights violations. Now, all of the perpetrators [*high-ranking military officials*] who had been imprisoned are receiving special treatment. Not only are they being granted parole, but they are even being granted total freedom, and their cases are being dismissed.” That is why GAM considers it essential to have some kind of protection from international resources and national mechanisms to protect human rights and cultural heritage. “This is why GAM considers it essential to have some kind of protection from international instruments or national human rights and heritage mechanisms. Otherwise, we run the risk that our archives will be seized, altered, or destroyed, which has already happened. We have information here that, if it were disappeared, would erase any trace of these families’ existence. To pretend that these events never happened would be terrible for Guatemalan democracy and would do great harm to the future of the country, its youth, and the generations to come.”



GAM banner calling for public support, 1986. Courtesy of GAM.

“Unfortunately, just nine months after GAM was founded, between March and April 1985, GAM’s vice president, Rosario Godoy de Cuevas, and our secretary, Héctor Gómez Calito, were kidnapped. First, in March, Héctor was kidnapped as he left a meeting held at the Peace Brigades office in Zone 11, in the Mariscal neighborhood, on the corner, but we didn’t realize what had happened. They took him away in a car to an unknown location. We didn’t hear anything about Héctor until the next day, when he was found on the road to Amatitlán with his hands and feet tied behind his back and his tongue cut out, obviously dead. We were also accompanied by Peace Brigades’ members, who were with us at all times from the moment when we found Héctor’s body tossed on the ground, accompanying Héctor’s family, during what were horrible times for us because of what had happened. A few days later, just before Holy Week in April, Rosario Godoy, who was around 23 or 24 at the time, was kidnapped from her own car. Her one-year-old son and her 20-year-old brother were also in the car with her. We believe that they were going to a supermarket, but they never made it. They were found early in the morning, showing signs of torture. Even the little baby had had his fingernails pulled out. It was terrible, very painful, very shocking. Thus, GAM’s founding members also became victims of violence, simply for organizing ourselves and demanding

that our relatives return alive and that those responsible for their disappearances be held accountable.

These cruel events had a profound impact on GAM members, some of whom were forced into exile. Others distanced themselves out of fear of suffering a similar fate, “while others among us pressed on.” During that difficult time, GAM received international support from the Latin American Federation of Families of the Detained and Disappeared, whose members “told me that I had to protect my life and that of my young daughter. That is when I asked Peace Brigades for help, because I knew that during Héctor’s wake and funeral, and later at Rosario’s, both my daughter and I were in terrible danger of losing our lives. Peace Brigades never once hesitated to support us. Immediately [after], I didn’t leave the Peace Brigades office. They organized a structure, a schedule, a calendar—I don’t know what—but from what I remember, starting on that day in April 1985 almost up until the signing of the Peace Accords, I was always accompanied by people from Peace Brigades, and not just me, but my little daughter too. In other words, from the time I left my house until I returned, there was always a member of Peace Brigades with me and another with my daughter. Peace Brigades always provided invaluable support, and I always say that if it hadn’t been for the support of Peace Brigades International, whose members protected us with their own bodies, even sleeping in our homes, we wouldn’t be having this conversation today. Life is very hard, but sometimes wonderful angels appear and somehow lend you a hand. For us, Peace Brigades was that wonderful angel who gave us moral support, support with their own bodies, risking their own lives. Peace Brigades became indispensable to our actions, activities, and our very survival.”

Challenging military and civilian governments

In the years following its creation, GAM became the most visible and coordinated organization. Despite constant threats and attacks, the women of GAM challenged the military governments first and, later, the civilian ones. In doing so, they paved



Father’s Day demonstration, 1986. Courtesy of GAM.



GAM demonstration behind the military parade at the Obelisco, zone 10, 1986. Courtesy of GAM.

the way for other organizations and future generations who continued in the struggle for human rights. In the 1980s, they carried out a series of high-profile public actions which, according to Nineth, “had an impact on society and sought to let the world know what was happening in Guatemala so that the state would be sanctioned.” In October 1985, they took over the metropolitan cathedral to encourage the Catholic clergy to speak out against the disappearances and provide moral support, at the very least. On National Independence Day and Army Day, which featured military parades, GAM held a counterdemonstration to name the violence that the army committed against the Guatemalan people, both in the capital and in other departments. On Father’s Day, they organized a demonstration in which children held

banners reading “Where is my dad?” They took over the National Palace and Congress to demand that the government return their loved ones alive and that members of Congress support talks with other authorities to establish a search commission. They also rejected attempts to pass amnesty laws for human rights violations committed during the armed conflict.⁴ According to Sara Poroj, “We didn’t get a response from anyone. Not one administration took action to find out where our relatives were.” Nineth recalls that they had high hopes for the proposed transition process. Before he was elected, presidential candidate Vinicio Cerezo said he knew where the clandestine prisons were and that he would help them. But once he was elected, all he offered was “food for families as a form of compensation. It was hard because

that wasn’t what we had asked for.” However, Nineth values the fact that “they actually admitted that they had our relatives, because they told us that they were guerrillas, communists, enemies of the state, and that they considered the GAM itself to be an enemy of the state.” Despite being under civilian rule, the use of forced disappearances against the population did not stop.

In the late 1980s, GAM began working to exhume clandestine graves. Sara was one of the coordinators of the exhumation team within the organization. She recalls that at first, “there was no support from the Public Prosecutor’s Office (MP), because they were afraid to investigate.” So, in “1988, we began the exhumations on our own, with the fire department.” But the process was soon formalized, and the MP and judges assumed their

4 Information gathered from the GAM website: <https://www.grupodeapoyomutuo.org.gt/historia/>

responsibilities. Sara highlights how complicated the procedures were, saying, “First, we collected testimonies from family members” in regions where clandestine cemeteries were known to exist, namely Chimaltenango, Quiché, Las Verapaces, and Petén. “We took the family members to the MP to give their statements. Then we had to obtain permission from the owners of the land where the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) was going to dig” in order to identify the remains through DNA testing of the surviving relatives and the skeletons found in the graves. For 15 years, Sara accompanied the families in their search, which concluded with the burial of their loved ones, allowing families to give them a dignified farewell. However, Sara has never learned the whereabouts of her husband, who was detained and disappeared 41 years ago.

In the case of Nineth’s husband, she found crucial information in the National Police Historical Archive (AHPN). This archive was discovered in 2005 and contained a file on the kidnapping of Edgar Fernando, Nineth’s husband, which also identified the perpetrators. This evidence was crucial to clarifying the truth about police actions and the state agents responsible for these acts in one of the first trials for forced disappearances held in Guatemalan courts. All of this was possible thanks to official documents that the police themselves had kept at the AHPN. “In his [Nineth’s husband’s] case, justice was done, but much too late, and it was very painful because we never found him. His mother, Ms. Emilia, left this world without knowing what happened to her son. Although she was pleased that the Ministry of Education changed the name of the school where she had been principal. They named it after her son, Edgar Fernando García,” as ordered by the ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

The family of Luz Leticia also managed to prove state institutions’ responsibility in the disappearance of their daughter

and sister. After Marta Hernández Agustín, Luz Leticia’s sister, spent six months investigating at the AHPN, she managed to identify evidence that was handed over to the MP, leading to the indictment of Juan Francisco Cifuentes Cano, former head of the Fifth Corps of the National Police,⁵ as one of the perpetrators of this crime. Luz Leticia’s other sister, Mirtala, explains that “if my mom and dad hadn’t organized, we wouldn’t have gotten this far.” However, since she first testified in January 2023, the trial has been stuck at the admission of evidence stage.

What does the state owe them?

Forty years searching for their detained and disappeared loved ones, looking for their remains so they can heal the wound that, as Mirtala Hernández puts it, will remain open until they find out what happened and find their loved ones. Despite the importance of this issue, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain justice for these crimes against humanity, which tore apart countless families and the very fabric of Guatemalan society. The justice system has failed to respond to these essential demands for healing. Time is passing, and both the relatives of victims who have been searching for them for decades and the perpetrators themselves are dying. The perpetrators maintain a terrible pact of silence surrounding the crimes they committed against the population during the 36 years of the internal armed conflict (IAC).

However, Sara still hopes that one day the clandestine cemeteries will be opened. “May the memory of those of us who struggled to find our loved ones live on, may our work be valued for the sake of historical memory and justice, for we have done our small part along this long road.”

Nineth, for her part, hopes that “all history books will tell the truth and that future generations will know and value what the rule of law and democracy have cost us in Guatemala.” To achieve this, she says, we need a state that “acknowledges what happened, honors the disappeared, and creates the conditions needed to



Her mother, Valentina, and her sisters, Marta and Mirtala, are looking for Luz Leticia Hernández Agustín, who disappeared in 1982. Guatemala, 02.08.2023.

⁵ Also indicted for his involvement in the disappearances of people listed in the Military Diary.



Sara Poroj at the GAM office. Guatemala, 29.04.2025.

search for them. Such disappearances must never occur again, and different opinions should be tolerated.”

“Forgiveness is for yourself – it helps you spiritually and makes you feel stable and healthy. But forgetting is impossible until you are able to see your family members’ remains.”

Nineth Montenegro

Luz Leticia’s sisters, Marta and Mirtala, agree that the first thing they need is to know what happened to their sister, saying, “We want to establish the truth, get justice, and get our sister back.” Mirtala calls on “the current government to open the archives that confirm and prove who was responsible for all the crimes committed, because everyone’s life is important.” Marta adds that the state must acknowledge that it committed serious crimes against its citizens. It must reveal how all these military and civilian governments abused

their power and showed a lack of humanity during the war, using brutality for their own benefit. It is important for the country’s historical memory that citizens understand this, so that something like this can never happen again.

GAM continues its work to this day. They seek justice for the various forced disappearances cases that have been reported to them since the organization was founded. The archive created from these cases serves as the basis for dozens of legal proceedings that their lawyers have brought forward. Notable cases include the forced disappearance of eight people in El Jute, Chiquimula, and the aforementioned case of Edgar Fernando García. Furthermore, together with other victim and survivor organizations, they have pushed forward the CREOMPAZ and Military Diary cases, both of which remain unresolved. Forty years after GAM was founded, and despite the organization’s



You can listen to the full interview with Nineth Montenegro here (Spanish only): <https://vimeo.com/969329929>

significant achievements and enormous social work, much remains to be done to fully achieve its original mission. This requires that state institutions fulfill their obligation to deliver justice for the horrific crimes committed during the IAC.

The struggle for the right to water on the southern coast:

“Water is life, not a commodity”

On March 22, World Water Day, we traveled to the southern coast and visited several communities that are part of the Retalhuleu Community Council (CCR), an organization we have accompanied for five years. The goal of this trip was to learn firsthand about the problems these communities face with regard to water. The communities are organized and are fighting for their right to water. We witnessed harrowing and outrageous realities and heard detailed testimonies that cry out for the urgent implementation of measures to alleviate the suffering of these families and communities.

While hundreds of people participated in the protest for the right to water in Mazatenango that day, in the 20 de Octubre neighborhood, ten minutes from Champerico, residents gathered with their children and grandchildren to playfully raise awareness about the importance of water, which is essential for the life of all species. Their slogans were “Without water there is no life” and “Water is life, not a commodity.”

CCR member Reselda Mejía told us that her struggle is not for her generation,

but rather for future generations, saying, “We want our children to know about our struggle and participate in defense of our rights, because this is a struggle that will not end with me. It must continue... to defend the rivers, nature, and our hard-working people who have been silenced.” That is why they explain to children that “they have rights: to health, education, food, play, recreation, and a healthy environment.” These are rights that are being denied to them, as we saw during our visit to five communities in the region, accompanied by Reselda.

Community representatives spoke to us about their living conditions, particularly how the lack of access to water is affecting them.

“If I don’t work, I don’t eat”

In the 20 de Octubre neighborhood, we met Adán de León. This 70-year-old resident had just climbed out of a well he was digging on the other side of the road and came over to say hello, as we had met him on previous visits. We asked him if he wasn’t too old to dig wells, to which he replied that he had to do something to live, as he had no help whatsoever and, despite his advanced age, no income, saying, “If I don’t work, I don’t eat.” He says that poverty in the neighborhood is rampant, there are no jobs, young people and parents have migrated, and children suffer from malnutrition. There is no land left to farm, and planting corn on rented land is not profitable because the cost of renting land and buying seeds and fertilizers is so high that it cannot be offset by the income from the crop. In addition, the lack of rain, the scarcity of other water sources, and unpredictable weather events are extra risks on top of those already mentioned.

Adán came to the community 30 years ago because there was water. There were rivers and marshes that provided food every day. But with the arrival of the sugar cane companies, deforestation



Reselda Mejía, a member of the Council of Communities of Retalhuleu (CCR), organizes the family gardens in the region, Champerico, 23.03.2025.

began. "When I saw them cutting down tree after tree, I said that it would be a disaster for Champerico, and that's what happened. That's how it is now." Then "they sprayed pesticides into the air, and it fell on the marshes, killing the shrimp and fish. There is no more fishing. The pollution is extremely serious. It affects children's health, but they don't care. We struggle, but we can't get rid of the sugar cane."

Adán explains that water no longer reaches the 20 de Octubre neighborhood, and that it hardly ever rains anymore. Fortunately, for the past six years, "we have had a water tank for the neighborhood and drinkable water in our homes, but they didn't build any drainage, so dirty water pools in the streets and causes a lot of pollution. Now a butcher shop opened on the street where the drain is located. Imagine, the flies come, drink the water and then land on the meat." We have gone to every state authority and every new administration and "presented the problem to them, but we have not received a response." However, Adán has not lost hope that one day they will find a project that will finance the installation of a drainage system for their neighborhood, "otherwise we will all end up sick." "We have to keep fighting for future generations, because our children and grandchildren will not be able to live here if there is no water or if all the water is polluted."

"We want the river to flow normally"

Marco Vinicio García has arrived from the hamlet of Carrizales, in the municipality of La Blanca, San Marcos, where 85 people currently live. "We are not yet part of the CCR, but we want to be, because water is a big problem for us. The rivers no longer flow where they used to because they are blocked or dammed. Motorized pumps are used to divert the river to other places to irrigate palm and banana plantations. That is why we suffer with the river." He is a fisherman and farmer,

and both professions are being affected by the water shortage caused by agro-industries. The diversion of the rivers leaves them with "rust-colored, stagnant water that no longer flows freely and where there are no longer any fish." Agricultural production has become difficult because "we lease land to plant, but seeds are very expensive, as is fertilizer. We live off corn; we no longer have other crops because the plantations fumigate from airplanes, polluting the air and water. That's why we no longer plant tomatoes, chili peppers, watermelons, or cucumbers. Furthermore, the water wells have dried up. So it's not worth it anymore. The rich have been getting in the way of us farmers for a long time." What you see in the community are "children with health problems due to water pollution, crops that no longer grow, and many elderly people and single mothers who have nothing to eat."

Sugar cane companies are largely responsible for this situation, as the



Sugar cane companies grab land, rivers and available water on the South Coast. Champerico, 23.03.2025.

sugar harvest begins in November and “they start fires, which heat up the environment and dry up the water.” Their products are transported in large trucks, which ruin the roads, and “it is us, the farmers, who have to fix them.”

They have tried to engage in dialogue with the company owners, but they do not want to “talk to their representative, they want to talk to the wealthy owner” to find solutions. So far, they have been unsuccessful. “Many people allow themselves to be bought off with a bag of beans. But we don’t want gifts paid for with our taxes; we want support so that we can work our land.”

“Our fish are dying”

In the village of Barrio El Palmo in Champerico, we met a group of fishermen who lament the fact that they can no longer work in their profession due to water scarcity and pollution. Daniel Santos Ambrosio Pérez, 55, said, “We fish with nets, with the water up to our chests, our waists, our knees. And sometimes we go out to the deepest parts in canoes. Fish grow in the marshes and lagoons and then go out to sea. In the summer, we suffer because the marshes get shallower, as the rivers dry up and the sea no longer feeds them, since we are 10 meters below sea level. So we wait for the rain to come and fill the rivers, which will feed the lagoons and marshes and allow the fish to grow.”



Pest found by fishermen. They suspect that it has been caused by the drains of the shrimp companies in the region. Taken from the Facebook of the Council of Communities for Food Sovereignty on the South Coast, 15.03.2024.

Abelino Salvador Mejía Cancinos is still alive in our memory and in our hearts.

With deep respect and affection we remember Abelino Salvador Mejía Cancinos, member of the Board of Directors of the Council of Communities of Retalhuleu (CCR), who passed away this May. Our deepest condolences to his family, friends, comrades and comrades in struggle.

We met Abelino in April 2020 when we began to accompany him and other members of CCR’s board of directors, who were suffering threats and a harsh criminalization process that lasted five years, in retaliation for their work in defense of the environment and the right to life. They were denounced by a former worker of a sugarcane company for crimes of coercion, threats and illegal detentions. During the five years of the trial, from which they were finally acquitted, they were subject to house arrest. This made it difficult for them to receive the necessary medical attention to their health problems caused by the trial. In addition to the health issues, they also suffered economic and social damages.

Abelino was a tireless defender of water, land, territory and Mother Nature. He exercised committed leadership in the struggles for the recovery of rivers affected by agribusiness in the South Coast, particularly by the sugar cane sector. He also stood out for his constant defense of the right to water and food of the communities affected by industrial practices that have deteriorated and contaminated the natural resources of the region. He was a reference in these struggles, earning the respect and affection of many disadvantaged communities of the South Coast.

Although his departure has filled us with sadness, his example, commitment and fighting spirit live on. His legacy inspires and will continue to inspire new generations of defenders of territories and life





The severe water shortage forces Verónica Díaz Chaxaj to irrigate her vegetable garden with used water, Champerico, 23.03.2025.

Juan Luis Baten García adds that the problems with this drought began when "the sugar cane companies arrived. They come with their motorized pumps to suck the water out of the rivers, so the rivers no longer feed the marshes." In the summer, the marshes "are only half a meter deep and heat up in the sun, so the fish die, the larvae die because there is no moisture for them to live, and the shrimp die from the chemicals sprayed on them" when the cane growers spray their fields.

Daniel urges companies not to block the rivers, "so that the water reaches its destination and the marshes don't dry up. We used to fish for different species such as shrimp, fish, crabs, mollusks, abalone, and clams that grow on the roots of the mangroves. But in the dry season, the water no longer flows because the plantations block it and pump it out for their crops. We need to catch the fish to sell them and use the money to buy beans and rice so that our families can survive."

Juan Luis, 63 years old, says that when he was 18 and came to the port to fish, he would take home 100 pounds of fish to sell at the market. However,

"not anymore. Now the companies are here, and they don't let us fish. There are no other job opportunities here, only fishing." Pollution of the marshes is another issue, because industrial fishing companies use insecticides and discharge their waste into natural lagoons and marshes, creating infestations of larvae (sea lice) that eat the fish. Juan Luis laments that the government does not monitor companies to ensure they comply with their obligations and the law, and that they do not rob the population of job opportunities and food. That is why he is not surprised that there are "many thieves and criminals in Champerico, because there are no sources of income."

They also work the land, but "nowadays it hardly ever rains." Daniel recalls that they used to plant "on May 10, and by August there was already corn; we planted sesame seeds, and by November there was already sesame. Now that's no longer the case. My dad used to tell me that the dry spell began on July 12 and ended on August 12. Now July is pure dry season, and the cornfields die. We need water; we don't want the rivers to be dammed up."

"We are just surviving"

The water situation is the same in the community of Nueva Gomera, where a group of five women and one man were waiting for us. The community was founded about 15 years ago when several families moved here from the community of Gomera, in Escuintla, because the population had grown and there was no more land available. Victor Chocojay, the eldest member of the group, recalls, "We came here to access land, we didn't come to invade or steal. When we arrived, there were trees and the water was nine or ten meters deep, but now it's 18 or 20 meters away from us. When we arrived, there was water, but now the rainy seasons come very late. The most common crop is corn, but if it doesn't rain, nothing grows. The palm and sugar cane companies are to blame. Deforestation and watering the sugar cane fields day and night take away our water, destroy our crops, and bring us disease because of environmental pollution. We are suffering greatly because of the issue of water."

The husbands of the women who attended the meeting work in the cane fields, working shifts ranging from eight to 24 hours. Some work all year round, but the majority only work from October to May. They take advantage of the break to work their fields, but if it doesn't rain, they can't harvest anything. They complain that "what they earn from sugarcane isn't enough to support their families. There was a recent pay increase of Q150 every two weeks, but they also increased the number of hours we work, and with the rise in the cost of living, we haven't felt any benefit from the increase." They told us that they cannot speak out about labor rights abuses. The men who work in the sugar cane company remain silent about working conditions because "if they complain, they will lose their jobs, and we will suffer even more." They would have no chance of finding work in another company because they would be blacklisted. "That's why our children suffer from malnutrition."

Twelve people from the community organized themselves to start family gardens. They began the project four years ago when health authorities identified many malnourished children. This was because “the prices of vegetables and greens rose too high.” Before, they would go to the river to wash and fetch water, but now, in order to water their gardens, cook, wash, and drink, they have to ask a neighbor who has a well deep enough to draw water. In their gardens, they plant black nightshade, sweet peppers, jalapeños, tomatoes, and chipotle, among other crops. “We share what we harvest from the gardens among ourselves and save the seeds to plant more. This is how we get by, more or less.”

Don Victor remarked that there is significant migration to the United States, but due to the recent change in administration there, “now they are being sent back, so the situation will become more complicated because there are no job opportunities here. The government has abandoned us, they have forgotten about us, and all the communities are in the same situation.”

“What we are asking is that companies fulfill their social responsibility, that they be conscious, that they stop digging deeper wells and that they plant trees so that the water level does not drop any further. We are not asking for money, nor do we want anything for free. We want them to take the surrounding community into account and not exploit their workers. We just want them to fulfill their responsibility.”



Chocolate chile is abundant in Veronica's garden, Champerico, 23.03.2025.

“There is no rainwater anymore”

In San Juan El Húmedo, we meet Verónica Díaz Caxaj, who shows us her 12-by-12-meter garden. There, she grows different kinds of fruits and vegetables, such as star apples, bananas, plantains, chipotle, tomatoes, beans, yucca, sweet potatoes, chocolate peppers, corn, and sesame seeds, thanks to a drip irrigation system with hoses that run between the plants. Every morning, she opens a tap on a tank where the family collects water used for washing dishes and their hands, and a small motor pumps the water for an hour or more, depending on the plants' needs. Verónica has been tending the garden for 10 years, and her family of nine lives off what they grow there. “We barter with neighbors who grow other kinds of crops.”

She says that the water shortage began around 2010. Since then, rainfall has declined, and the capacity of the wells has decreased. Last year, there was absolutely no rain in her community. There was no corn harvest. “Now we recycle water because there is no rainwater. We have declared this area the dry corridor.” She also explains that the Samalá River, which runs about 2.5 kilometers away from her land, no longer has much water because “Luis García's plantation has taken it and diverted it to irrigate his pasture, to have his green area and so his animals can graze, taking water away from the community and also causing flooding on the road. Go and see for yourselves.”

Flooding on dry land

We drove along a local road connecting the communities of Las Victorias and San Juan El Húmedo until we came to a flooded dirt road. You have to know the area well to know where to drive to get through the flood without getting too wet. “There is little flooding right now. In the rainy season, when they coincide with heavy rains, the road becomes dangerous and, while the flooding lasts, the children of San Juan cannot go to school in Las Victorias.”

Local residents of the communities are outraged by the attitude of Spanish plantation owner Luis García, who runs a cattle and lemon farm and diverts the river for his own benefit. This prevents the river from flowing along its usual course, filling wells and emptying into the sea. It also causes flooding that harms residents of neighboring communities. This is especially painful during the dry season, when they have no access to drinking water and yet find water being wasted along the road, hindering movement between these two communities, particularly for those who travel on foot.

Local residents have brought their complaints to various political authorities, including the governor's office, but they have been ignored. “We have already sent him a formal request



Flooding of the road connecting the communities of Las Victorias and San Juan El Húmedo during the dry season, Champerico, 23.03.2025.

to allow the river to flow freely and stop causing flooding, but he doesn't care. He ignores our complaints. He also treats his employees however he wants, exploiting them and thinking he is better than them because he is Spanish. He has already been sued for labor rights violations, as he does not pay in accordance with the law, does not pay the minimum wage or IGSS (social security) contributions for his workers, and takes advantage of the precarious working conditions in the region. Two people sued him and won, but these two people can no longer find work on the farms here. He only looks out for his own interests; he doesn't think about his workers or his neighbors."

“We want to eat something healthy”

In each community, we found family gardens of different sizes. Depending on the land available, they range from 10-15 to 50-100 square meters. They grow radishes, chipotle, beets, cabbage, tomatoes, Swiss chard, black nightshade, chili peppers, and, when there is more water available, cucumbers, cantaloupe, and watermelon, as these require a lot of water to grow. Reselda explains that “four years ago, CCR began organizing family gardens in communities to ensure food security for families and combat child malnutrition. This provides us with naturally nutritious plants rich in minerals and vitamins. We also fertilize them with our own natural fertilizer made from ash,

lime, and eggshells.” The women are in charge of the gardens, as they are the ones who use the most water during the day due to their household chores. “We are more aware of water usage and know how to recycle water. We have received training on how to use it. We produce crops even though the rivers and watersheds no longer provide us with enough water.” The crops are only for family consumption, as there is not enough to sell because of the water shortage caused by the hoarding of rivers by agribusinesses.

“We are organizing women and youth to speak out against all the harm and violence that is being done to us. We are women defenders, and we believe that we have power, even though we have



Meeting of neighbors organizing to move forward with family gardens, Champerico, 23.03.2025. CostaSur_NuevaGomera.JPG

been attacked, discriminated against, and humiliated in different ways. But we have decided to no longer remain silent, to make our voices heard, to make the Ministry of the Environment aware and get them to take action, to make the government see our needs and see what we are going through. We are not asking for crumbs or charity, we are asking for our rights to be respected and fulfilled, the rights granted to us by the Constitution. We are human beings, we have blood, we have life, we want to continue to have clean air, we want to feel the rain, we want it to fall on us. We

no longer have rain because of all the logging, they are polluting our air and our rivers with so much agribusiness, sugar cane, palm oil, and bananas. The water no longer flows where it should: to the sea. We no longer see the clouds gathering over the sea to fill up with water and bring it to us. This affects our agricultural system; our crops no longer yield like they used to.

“We are tired of so much pollution. We want to eat something healthy, something we have produced ourselves. When I sit down at my table, I can eat

black nightshade and know that it is healthy and free of chemicals. When I barter, I know that I am giving something good and not giving cancer or other diseases caused by Monsanto or Bayer,” the corporations that sell genetically modified seeds and fertilizers. “They come and play with our health.”

On World Water Day, “we appeal to the conscience of the industry. There is no water left in Champerico. The southern coast is asking you to leave let the rivers flow free. Water is life,” and if you threaten water, you threaten life.

A New Historic Sentence in the Maya Achí Women's case:

Perpetrators Convicted of Crimes Against Humanity Committed in the Form of Sexual Violence

On January 28, 2025, in the Human Rights Plaza, in front of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) of Guatemala, indigenous Maya Achí women from Rabinal, Baja Verapaz demanded justice from the state for crimes of sexual violence and crimes against humanity committed against them during the Internal Armed Conflict (IAC). These brave women, survivors of rape and torture, have spent more than a decade demanding “justice in the name of historical memory, truth, and the defense of land and territory,” as well as a “prompt response to the ongoing fight against impunity.”



They began their quest for justice in 2011, when, with the support of the Rabinal Community Legal Clinic, they filed charges with the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP) for violence they had suffered at the hands of several former Civil Defense Patrolmen (PACs). This first trial concluded in January 2022 when High Risk Court A sentenced five ex-PACs to 30 years in prison for crimes against humanity and sexual violence committed against the survivors of these crimes. The men convicted were Damián Cuxum Alvarado, Benbenuto and Bernardo Ruiz Aquino, and Francisco and Gabriel Cuxum Alvarado. This first sentence found that “sexual violence was used as a weapon of war during the internal armed conflict. The army, military commissioners, and PAC used sexual violence in a widespread and systematic way to bring women and Indigenous communities under military control. This practice was particularly serious in Rabinal, where the State's armed forces attacked women in their homes, at the local military base, at a PAC encampment, and in public places

PBI accompanies some of the hearings in the Mujeres Achi case, Guatemala, 28.02.2025.



The exPAC defendants who were sentenced on May 30 for crimes against humanity in the form of sexual violence, Guatemala 28.02.2025.

within the communities. Additionally, many women were forced to cook and carry out domestic services for the soldiers under threat of being murdered, as in the Sepur Zarco case.”¹

However, during the first trial, which began in 2011 and concluded with the 2022 sentence, three of the ex-PACs who were initially charged—Pedro Sánchez Cortéz, Simeón Enrique Gómez, and Félix Tum Ramírez—were released in 2019 by Judge Claudette Dominguez, who dismissed the case against them. Thanks to an appeal by the victims’ lawyers, who also filed criminal charges against the judge for racism and denial of justice, the decision to dismiss the case was overturned. In March 2022, the three ex-PACs were ordered to stand trial themselves. The hearing, which took place in January 2025 and was attended by representatives of Guatemalan civil

society and the international community, marked the start of the second trial, which lasted four months. On May 30, 2025, High Risk Court B sentenced all three of the ex-PACs who evaded justice in 2019 to 40 years in prison without the possibility of parole for crimes against humanity in the form of sexual violence. Once again, Guatemala is making history by prosecuting and convicting perpetrators of serious crimes, thanks to the tireless struggle of the surviving victims. Unfortunately, seven of the 36 victims who brought charges in this long process died during the proceedings. They were therefore unable to see their victory over the terrible violence, injustice, and impunity they suffered.² In fact, the survivors themselves have stated that this case seeks to “vindicate the memory and struggle of those who are no longer with us,” referring to their deceased comrades. As lawyer Lucía Xiloj stated in her opening statement

at the trial, the trial is not only about judging the facts and identifying those responsible; instead, “the goal is to remember that serious human rights violations took place in our country” and to ensure that “justice is a mechanism for healing and contributing to ensure that these events never happen again.”

The facts tried in this second trial took place in Rabinal between 1981 and 1983. Among the crimes committed by the three ex-PACs are illegal detention, repeated individual and gang rape, psychological violence, threats, and torture against indigenous Maya Achi women and girls. During the hearings, several of which PBI observed, it was explained how the PACs were organized, armed, and controlled by the Guatemalan Army to control the population and territory during the IAC.

According to the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), “the PACs engaged in combat against the guerrilla and committed serious crimes against the civilian population.”³ They participated in massacres, summary executions, forced disappearances, and sexual violence, among other crimes. Thus, as the prosecutor stated during the hearing, “the PAC contributed to state terrorism by taking advantage of the climate of impunity that existed at the time.”

Rabinal was one of the municipalities most affected by violence perpetrated by the PACs during the IAC. According to the CEH, Rabinal saw “the highest percentage of human rights violations committed by the PACs.”⁴

The sentences in the Achi Women’s case have been described as “one of the most emblematic cases of sexual violence

1 Impunity Watch, Sentence in the Maya Achi Women’s Case Summary, Guatemala, 2022.

2 Álvarez Nájera, L., ExPAC culpables de crímenes de lesa humanidad contra mujeres Achi, Agencia Ocote, 30 May 2025.

3 Impunity Watch, The Maya Achi Women’s Struggle for Justice.

4 Impunity Watch, Segundo juicio del caso Mujeres Achi.

in the IAC,”⁵ though this is not the first time that a court has determined that sexual violence was used as a weapon of war. Other transitional justice cases such as Sepur Zarco, Molina Thiessen, and the Ixil Genocide case have already revealed the “systemic pattern of using sexual violence as a weapon of war in the context of internal armed conflict” with the aim of “destroying women’s dignity” and affecting their families and communities.⁶ Therefore, given the seriousness of the crimes in question, and as lawyer Gloria Elvira Reyes

Xitumul stated at the first hearing, “it is important for society as a whole that these cases do not go unpunished,” and that “it is the State’s obligation to provide comprehensive reparations to the victims.”

This second trial marked the culmination of a long road in the struggle for justice for the women victims and survivors of these atrocities. With great courage, strength, and determination, they decided to break the silence surrounding events that were extremely difficult to

speak out about, given the high risk of social stigmatization the women faced. They decided to fight against impunity and, as lawyer Haydee Valey said, to contribute to ensuring that such horrific events never happen again and that the state never again uses sexual violence to sow terror among its population. Now there is a hopeful path toward dignified reparations and the non-repetition of such crimes. The court has set a hearing date on June 4, 2025 to decide on reparations.



The MP prosecutor and the adhesive plaintiffs’ lawyers Lucía Xiloj, Haydeé Valey and Gloria Elvira Reyes Xitumul, who also won the first Achí Women’s case in 2022, Guatemala 28.02.2025.

5 Ibid.

6 First hearing in the Achí Women’s case, 28 Jan 25.



PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL GUATEMALA PROJECT

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.

Team office in Guatemala

3a. Avenida "A", 3-51 zona 1,
Ciudad de Guatemala
Tels.: (00502) 2220 1032 / 2232 2930
correo-e: equipo@pbi-guatemala.org

Web: www.pbi-guatemala.org
Facebook: [pbiguatemala](https://www.facebook.com/pbiguatemala)
Instagram: [pbiguatemala](https://www.instagram.com/pbiguatemala)
Linked In: [PBI Guatemala](https://www.linkedin.com/company/pbi-guatemala)

Photos: PBI Guatemala



**Published in Guatemala City
in June 2025**

This work has been published under Creative Commons's licence. It is allowed the total or partial reproduction of this publication provided it is without means of profit, the source is mentioned and PBI Guatemala is notified about the use (mail to coordinacion@pbi-guatemala.org).

- Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- NonCommercial: You may not use the material for commercial purposes.
- ShareAlike: If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

