

via email: <a href="mailto:gobernadoraltaverapaz@gmail.org">gobernadoraltaverapaz@gmail.org</a> Sr. José Adrian López Monterroso Governor of Department of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala	via fax: 011 502 2411 9124 Dr. Claudia Paz y Paz Bailey Attorney General of Guatemala
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January 13, 2011

Dear Sir and Madam:

We are writing to express our opposition to the continuing state of siege in Alta Verapaz and the consequent oppression of the indigenous q'eqchi' peasant communities in the region. The fact that the siege allows police and soldiers to arrest anyone without warrant, as well as control the press and prohibit assembly and possession of arms, represents an egregious misuse of authority.

We are especially disturbed at the arrest of q'eqchi' peasant leader **Pablo Sacrab Pop**. On December 28, he and other members of the community Saquimo Setana were doing voluntary road maintenance work when wealthy land owner Benjamin Soto jumped out of a passing truck, pointed a gun at the unarmed community members and told them to freeze or he would shoot. They ran, but Sacrab, who was not able to escape, was grabbed by four or five men and pulled into a truck. The following day the community was told that the unknown men who participated in the attack with Soto were out-of-uniform police. We continue to be deeply troubled at this evidence of continued collaboration between wealthy land "owners" and government security forces in repressing the majority q'eqchi' population (cf our letter of Sept. 13, 2010).

We are also worried about human rights violations committed by the industrial agriculture company Chabil Utzaj, which has received US government funds and has organized violent attacks against q'eqchi' families in Alta Verapaz. In July 2008, managers of Chabil Utzaj fired guns at campesinos who were protesting in Telemán, and their security forces kidnapped two members Peasants' Unity Committee (CUC). In November 2010, the company's security forces opened fire on unarmed peasants in Panzos with assault rifles, seriously injuring one community leader; they also burned down a dozen houses. It was one of many attacks in the region led by private and government security forces in the region in attempts to steal land.

According to UNICEF and census information, over 100,000 q'eqchi' children in Alta Verapaz are suffering from chronic malnutrition. This is a direct result of the violent theft of q'eqchi' lands by Guatemalan military and wealthy landowners who use the land for such purposes as planting African Palm trees for biodiesel fuel. We are also horrified that the U.S. is involved in the training, equipping and accompanying of the military and police who are heading the state of siege, which will have the effect of terrorizing peasant leaders and communities that are organizing for their rights.

**Based on the facts presented above, we urge you to**

- immediately release q'eqchi' leader Pablo Sacrab Pop, who has committed no crime;
- guarantee the safety of members of the indigenous q'eqchi' community of Alta Verapaz;
- end the state of siege and the consequent repression of the members of the q'eqchi' community; and
- prevent the exploitation of the q'eqchi' community by wealthy landowners and business interests.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai, Coordinator

**CC:** Francisco Villagran de Leon, Guatemalan Ambassador to the US ~ via fax: 202 745 1908  
 Stephen McFarland, US Ambassador to Guatemala ~ via fax: 011-502-2334-8477  
 Dinah Shelton, US member of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights~ via fax: (202)458-3992  
 Brett Hamsik, Guatemala Desk, US State Dept ~ via fax: 202-647-2597  
 US Senators Brown & Portman ~ via email  
 US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Kaptur, Kucinich, LaTourette, Latta, Renacci, Ryan, Sutton ~ via email

**The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter:**