

IRTF

InterReligious Task Force on Central America

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Ambassador Alfonso José Quiñónez Lemus
Embassy of Guatemala
2220 R St. NW.
Washington, DC 20008

August 25, 2022

Dear Ambassador Quiñónez:

We are troubled by your government's pattern of restrictions on freedom of the press as demonstrated by the arrests of award-winning journalist **José Rubén Zamora** and **Flora Silva**, the finance director of the independent media outlet El Periódico. The independent press has played a fundamental role in investigating, reporting and revealing serious cases of corruption and the links between organized crime groups and Guatemalan political elites.

On July 29, José Rubén Zamora was arrested on charges (including blackmail and influence peddling) that are considered by international human rights experts to be baseless. His arrest came five days after local outlets published strong criticism of various officials of President Giammattei's administration involved in corruption.

On August 19, Guatemala's Public Ministry ordered the arrest of Flora Silva, the finance director of El Periódico, even though she had been cooperating with the investigation into Zamora's alleged blackmail and money laundering. Police raided her home before the arrest. During the raid, Flora Silva suffered a hypertension crisis and was hospitalized. Discharged from the hospital on August 23, she is being held in pre-trial detention at Mariscal Zavala prison.

We are equally concerned about the arrest of assistant public prosecutor **Samari Gómez Díaz** on July 30, allegedly in connection with charges against José Rubén Zamora. Samari Gómez Díaz is one of at least five female prosecutors arrested and spuriously charged in the past seven months.

US tax dollars for decades have been provided to the Guatemalan government to improve the judicial system. That very system is being increasingly used to persecute those challenging corruption and fighting for justice. The arrest of José Rubén Zamora is part of an intensifying pattern of persecution and criminalization of justice operators, journalists, and human rights defenders. It is a grave abuse of the criminal justice system to target journalists and prosecutors known for investigating corruption to uphold the rule of law.

We call on the government of Guatemala to

- immediately release José Rubén Zamora, Flora Silva, and Samari Gómez Díaz and drop all charges against them
- respect the precautionary measures granted by the Inter-America Commission on Human Rights to guarantee the physical integrity of José Rubén Zamora and the prosecutor Samari Gómez Díaz
- guarantee the right of human rights defenders, journalists, and justice sector officials to carry out their work safely and without impediment
- stop the targeting of women human rights defenders working to guarantee the right to justice
- comply with the 2014 Inter-American Court ruling in Human Rights Defender vs. Guatemala to implement a public protection policy for human rights defenders

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-coordinators



Christine Stonebraker Martínez

copies: Licda. María Consuelo Porras Argueta, Fiscal General de Guatemala/ Attorney General ~ via email
Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights of Guatemala (PDH) ~ via email
IACHR: Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño, Rapporteur for Guatemala and for Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email and US mail
IACHR: Pedro José Vaca Villarreal, Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email and US mail
OACNUDH: Mika Kanervuori, Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (OACNUDH) ~ via email
US State Department: Guatemala Desk Officers in Washington, DC: Doug Choi, Moises Mendoza ~ via email
US State Department: William Popp, US Ambassador to Guatemala, in care of human rights officer Sarahann Yeh ~ via email
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Gibbs, Gonzalez, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Ryan ~ via email

25 AUG 2022_GHRC-USA_Guatemala

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