

IRTF

InterReligious Task Force on Central America

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Lic. José Alejandro Córdoba

Procurador de los Derechos Humanos

Office of the Human Rights Attorney

12 avenida 12-54, zona 1. Ciudad de Guatemala

December 24, 2022

Dear Procurador Córdoba:

We are outraged to learn of another forced displacement of a Maya Q'eqchi' community by state security forces.

On December 6, Guatemalan security forces arrived at the **community of Chapín Abajo** in El Estor municipality, Izabal Department, to carry out an eviction on behalf of the palm oil company NaturAceites. Paramilitary groups arrived in boats to work alongside the security forces. Together they raided homes of families, stealing their food and personal belongings. When community members showed resistance, the armed forces fired tear gas, exposing dozens of people, including children, to unsafe levels of the toxic gas.

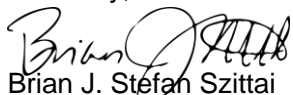
Several people were injured. A delegation of four Maya Q'eqchi' ancestral councils and independent journalists arrived later to document the situation. They confirmed that a 17-year-old was seriously wounded and hospitalized in critical condition. At least one other young man was missing. Two other men suffered gunshot wounds. Several women were beaten and sustained injuries to their faces and bodies.

This latest attack is part of a pattern of state violence against Q'eqchi' communities on behalf of corporate interests. Founded in 2011 by Guatemalan businessman Juan Maegli Müller, NaturAceites has operations in Guatemala and El Salvador. In 2021, an international investigative journalist alliance called Behind the Fingerprints of the Palm solicited information about the company from several government agencies, including the Ministry of the Environment, Office of the Human Rights Attorney, and the National Council of Protected Areas. They learned that of 60 cases of complaints and open cases against palm oil companies for environmental crimes in Guatemala between 2010 and 2021, nine of them pointed to NaturAceites. In Izabal, NaturAceites controls extensive palm plantations on Maya Q'eqchi' lands. In addition to polluting rivers, it unjustly accuses community residents of usurping the land. They have sent police to evict families four times over the past year.

During the past several months, several Q'eqchi' communities have been evicted in the region of Alta Verapaz, Izabal and Petén. We strongly urge that authorities:

- legally resolve any land disputes between the community members of Chapín Abajo and NaturAceites
- immediately cancel all eviction orders
- stop issuing eviction orders while legal processes are still pending
- release any community members detained during the raid
- guarantee the physical safety of residents of Chapín Abajo
- stop siding with the interests of private companies over the needs of subsistence farmers

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-coordinators



Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Licda. María Consuelo Porras Argueta, Attorney General of Guatemala ~ via email
Alfonso José Quiñónez Lemus, Ambassador of Guatemala to the US ~ email, US mail
IACHR: Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño, Rapporteur for Guatemala, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email and US mail
OACNUDH: Mika Kanervavuori, Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (OACNUDH) ~ via email
NaturAceites ~ via US mail
Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil ~ via email
US State Department: William Popp, US Ambassador to Guatemala; Guatemala Desk Officers in Washington, DC: Doug Choi, Moises Mendoza ~ via email
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Gibbs, Gonzalez, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Ryan ~ via email

09 DEC 2022_GHRC-USA_Guatemala

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