

# IRTF

InterReligious Task Force on Central America

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Dr. Ramiro Alejandro Contreras Escobar, Executive Director  
Comision Presidencial por la Paz y los Derechos Humanos (COPADEH)  
Presidential Commission for Peace and Human Rights  
13 calle 15-38, zona 13  
Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA

June 24, 2023

Dear Dr. Contreras:

We are extremely concerned about the ongoing violence against Indigenous people trying to reclaim their ancestral lands. In April 2022, more than 130 Q'anjob'al Mayan families arrived in the community of Kumatz (municipality of Barillas, Huehuetenango Department) to recover the lands they abandoned due to forced displacement during the civil war. Since their return, they have faced surveillance, threats of eviction, and death threats by occupying families in Barillas.

In the early morning hours of June 13, a several Indigenous campesinos from Kumatz were on their way to tend to their crops when they were ambushed by private security forces (reportedly from Rancho Emilia) who arrived in multiple pick-up trucks, armed with various caliber rifles and guns. Residents of Kumatz reported that the attackers fired guns into the community, and they heard shots being fired from a nearby security station. A farmer managed to disarm one of the attackers but was shot in the back. The shooting lasted for a few hours, killing community members **Carlos Fernando Calderón Herrera** and **Juan Francisco Artola Chub**. Others were injured and taken to a hospital in Ixcán, Quiché Department. Hours later the National Civil Police (PNC) mobilized to regain control over the territory, with additional backup from army helicopters.

This shooting is only one spike in the ongoing conflict taking place in Barillas between land occupiers and the Q'anjob'al Mayan families trying to reclaim their ancestral lands. More than 130 of the families who had been displaced to Mexico during the armed conflict returned last year to two small communities in Barillas (Kumatz and Sargentos) to reclaim their lands. They have since been met with violence and harassment by private landowners, one of them the Reyes Herrera family, who now claim the lands as their own. A legal dispute is pending.

We strongly urge the Guatemalan government to take decisive measures to end the violence against the Q'anjob'al Mayan families in Barillas by:

- investigating the shooting and killing on June 13, publish the results, and bring those responsible to justice
- disarming the private security forces who are inflicting violence on the families of Kumatz
- settling the land disputes between the occupying families and the Q'anjob'al Mayan families who claim these as their ancestral lands

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
Co-coordinators



Christine Stonebraker Martínez

copies: Licda. María Consuelo Porras Argueta, Attorney General / Fiscal General de la República ~ via email  
Lic. José Alejandro Córdoba, Procurador de Derechos Humanos/Human Rights Ombudsman ~ 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  
US State Department: William Popp, US Ambassador to Guatemala ~ via email  
US State Department: Guatemala Desk Officers in Washington, DC: Doug Choi, Moises Mendoza ~ via email  
US Senators Brown & Vance ~ via email  
US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Miller, Sykes ~ via email

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