

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

August 24, 2023

Dear Dr. Contreras:

We write to you today out of grave concern for the **Indigenous community of Kumatz**, in Barillas, Huehuetenango Department, which was recently **violently evicted from their land by the Guatemalan National Police (PNC)**.


This eviction is yet another spike in the ongoing conflict taking place in the community of Kumatz between Indigenous families and private land-occupiers. On April 30, 2022, more than 130 families of Q'anjob'al, Akateko and Chuj Mayan origins, who self-identify as survivors of the internal armed conflict and as the descendants of displaced people, returned to their ancestral homelands after their village was destroyed by the military during the internal armed conflict, causing the community to seek refuge in Mexico. These families are trying to both their land and the remains of their deceased relatives, as some of the names of the elders in the community appear on the deeds of land ownership. They have been met with harassment, surveillance, and armed violence by the private *finqueros* (plantation owners) now occupying their lands, culminating in a shooting in June 2023 that left two Q'anjob'al Mayan farmers dead (cf our letter of 24 JUN 2023).

On July 19, 2023, the governor ordered 2,500 officers of the National Civil Police (PNC), including riot police, to carry out the violent eviction of these Indigenous families from their ancestral lands. Several community members, both men and women, were physically assaulted by police and dragged out by their hair. The following day, the families' houses, personal belongings, and livestock were burned by the private security forces of private landowners Roderico "Lico" Herrera, Fabián Molina, and Gildardo Antulio Muñoz Ávila, who have been accused by the community of arbitrarily appropriating their land during the internal armed conflict. Lico Herrera asked Judge Oswaldo Romeo Martínez Palacios to order the eviction, and the justice of the peace who carried out the judge's eviction order told the community they had 15-20 days to gather all of their belongings.

The future of the community of Kumatz is uncertain. Some members of the community are taking refuge with relatives in neighboring areas. Some are living on the Northern Transversal Strip waiting for a response from the capital, while others, including pregnant women and children, are still unaccounted for after the chaos of the eviction. Returning to Mexico is not an option for them. We therefore strongly urge that authorities:

- provide aid and refuge to the community of Kumatz, and help family members to re-establish contact after the chaos of the eviction
- disarm the private security forces and provide protection to the families of Kumatz
- legally settle the land dispute, recognizing the ancestral stewardship of this land by the Maya Indigenous peoples and their forced displacement during the internal armed conflict

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 and 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: