

IRTF

InterReligious Task Force on Central America

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Ambassador Hugo Eduardo Beteta
Embassy of Guatemala
2220 R St. NW.
Washington, DC 20008

May 2, 2025

Dear Ambassador Beteta:

We urge that your government respect the rights of the Indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' communities in the highlands of Izabal Department, where influential landowners are contesting communities' ancestral claims. It is also worth noting, as we did in our letter to authorities on April 14, 2025, that many of these same communities that are involved in land disputes are also resisting the expansion of large-scale metallic mining.

On March 15, **Luis Xol Caal**, a leader from the Q'eqchi' community of Chaab'il Ch'och' in Livingston municipality, was arrested by the National Civil Police (PNC) on false charges of aggravated usurpation, threats, and illegal detention. Luis Xol Caal, a member of the Campesino Committee of the Highlands (CCDA), was detained despite the fact that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had previously granted precautionary measures to his community, which is situated near the Chocón Machacas nature reserve and with access to the Caribbean Sea.

The detention of Luis Xol Caal detention is part of an ongoing criminalization campaign linked to a long-standing land dispute. In 2018, community residents testified before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that the private individuals who are claiming land ownership had been using their land for drug trafficking. Despite the existence of early documents showing that the Q'eqchi' residents have been there since 1850—and many assert that their ancestors were there much earlier—the government still has not recognized the community as the rightful owners of the land to this day, 175 years later.

Earlier in the month, following an order from a judge, the National Civilian Police (PNC) carried out violent evictions in the **Maya Q'eqchi' community of Río Tebernal**, Livingston municipality. For three days in a row (March 5-7), gunshots were fired and residents were forcibly removed from their homes. The PNC was supported by private individuals, including Byron Matta, who is claiming land ownership. The living conditions of the families post-eviction are dire. Between March 18 and April 7, observers from a Costa Rican human rights commission, accompanied by representatives of CCDA, documented lack of food, drinking water, electricity, healthcare, and children's education.

We urge that authorities in Guatemala

- release Luis Xol Caal from detention and drop the spurious criminal charges against him
- resolve the land dispute in Río Tebernal in the courts and provisionally allow the families to return
- end the practice of enforced eviction while land rights are still being disputed in the court system

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-coordinators



Christine Stonebraker-Martínez

copies: Lic. José Alejandro Córdoba, Ombudsman for Human Rights (PDH) ~ via email
IACHR: Andrea Pochak (Rapporteur for Guatemala) and Arif Bulkan (Rights of Indigenous Peoples), 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 (UN) ~ via email
US State Department: Tobin John Bradley (US Ambassador to Guatemala) and Guatemala Desk Officers in Washington, DC ~ via email
US Senators Husted and Moreno ~ via email
US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Miller, Rulli, Sykes ~ via email

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