



## **FIELD REPORT: GUATEMALA PROJECT**

**April 2007**

1) Media coverage of the election process has been distracted by the February 19 abduction, torture and murder of three Salvadoran officials and their driver who were in Guatemala for a meeting of the Central American Parliament. Four policemen were arrested for the crime and within days they were murdered in prison. This has blown up into scandal proportions leading to the resignations of the Minister of Government and the head of the Penal System, both of whom appeared implicated in the crime. The crimes have created heightened alarm in the international community as well. There is some hope that this might open a national discussion about the model of national security that has gained importance. However, some believe that the response by the government and press has been weak and the push for a thorough investigation and arrests of the intellectual authors of the crime is stalled.

2) Voices representing international bodies are expressing concern about impunity for acts of violence and violations of human rights in Guatemala. The Guatemalan press reported that Anders Kompass, representative of the U.N. High Commission on Human Rights, spoke up in the European Parliament saying "It is deceptive and scandalous that the impunity continues happening so calmly in this country." This body has previously noted that impunity in Guatemala continues to undermine the credibility of the justice system, and that the justice system is still too weak to confront organized crime and its powerful structures.

The same press report quoted a government representative saying that the lack of scientific equipment and advanced technology for processing evidence is part of the problem. Another spokesperson for the ombudsman's office of human rights said there is a lack of training and efficiency among the employees who work at crime scenes and also among forensic doctors.

High-level officials of the Government of Guatemala have acknowledged the infiltration of organized criminal networks into the state apparatus and the difficulty of combating these networks when they are deeply entrenched in public institutions.

3) On April 25, a report entitled "Extrajudicial Executions of Stigmatized Youth, The Legal, Social and Human Dimensions of the Phenomenon and the Responsibility of the Guatemalan Government in the Misnamed 'Social Cleansing'" was released by The Center for Action on Human Rights, the Institute of Comparatives Studies on Criminal Science of Guatemala, and the Association for the Study and Promotion of Security in Democracy. The report was a review of the human rights situation in recent years and

included the results of a one-month study of two outlying communities of Guatemala City, which points to a somewhat favorable public climate of tolerance and indifference to extrajudicial murders.

Some respondents presumed the victims were gang members or drug addicts or people who are, in their opinion, deserving of their fate. The report observed that official proclamations stigmatizing poor youth as gang members and juvenile delinquents have encouraged this public perception. The crimes, ranging from illegal detentions to torture and murder, are interpreted as a get-tough-on-crime response. None of the cases noted in the study have been adjudicated.

4) The Peace Accords of 1994-1996 continue to be a reference point for many groups working in Human Rights, however, there is considerable discussion about whether the government has lived up to its pledges.

The U.S. State Department has noted that police corruption is a serious problem in Guatemala and there are credible allegations of involvement of police officers in criminal activity, including rapes, killings, and kidnappings. The events of February 19 appear to bear out this allegation, with police involvement in the murders of the Salvadoran diplomats.

On December 12, 2006, the Government of Guatemala and the United Nations signed an agreement to establish the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala--CICIG) to assist local authorities in investigating and dismantling illegal security groups and clandestine organizations that continue to operate in Guatemala. This seems to indicate the Government of Guatemala hears the concerns of the international bodies. The Congress has yet to ratify this agreement.

Nevertheless, human rights groups, ranging from environmentalists to women's groups to human rights investigators, continue to receive threats through phone calls, surveillance, abductions, break-ins and personal threats and assassinations. Amnesty International has taken up many of these cases.

### **The work of the team**

Shortly after the IGC approved the project to accompany The Unit of Protection of Human Rights Defenders (La Unidad) in March, NPs Rapid Response department began enlisting personnel. Team Coordinator, Betsy Crites, arrived on April 10 and started work both in accompaniment and in setting up the necessary infrastructure for the additional 3 team members to follow. Within the first 2 days, and with the help of Claudia Samayoa and La Unidad staff, NP was able to get four cell phones, and a bank account. Finding a house for the team took another two weeks.

Team members Ann Frisch arrived on April 14 and Penn Garvin on April 16 and they immediately began to take most of the accompaniment assignments while Betsy searched

for and contracted for the house, responded to NP correspondence and administrative duties, and provided general back-up support for the team.

The team moved out of the hotel and into a furnished 3 bedroom house on April 26 with great relief to have the space and privacy. The house is centrally located within walking distance of the Unit office and is on a relatively quiet street. We have also rented a room across the street for the fourth team member.

The team has received a thorough orientation on Guatemalan society, electoral politics and government organization provided by Guatemalan organizations. Betsy and Claudia met with representatives of the other accompaniment groups PBI and ACOGUATE, both separately and together. NP's team has established an accompaniment protocol, security procedures and rapid response approaches to potentially threatening situations. A further training with in-coming members, including role plays, is being prepared.

Penn Gavin led the process of editing the Volunteers Handbook for Guatemala. Ann Frisch is maintaining a blog with additional details about Guatemala and the work for the team. This can be accessed at [www.amnfrisch.blogspot.com](http://www.amnfrisch.blogspot.com). Uniforms arrived thanks to Regional Coordinator Alvaro Ramirez-Durini and Claudia's assistance on the Guatemala side.

The team has been actively accompanying Claudia and her staff from the April 10 initiation, but there have been gaps because of lack of personnel, our training sessions and moving into our house. ACOGUATE personnel have filled in some of those gaps. This week, May 2, we have been able to fill all the requests of the staff, though they were on holiday for 2 days. With the increase to four on the team, we should be in good shape to cover the needs.

The fundraising efforts for the Guatemala project have so far raised more than half the budget. The team wants to express it's gratitude to all the NP administrative staff and to Claudia and the staff of the Unit for the countless ways it has supported the initiation of this project.

*Report written by Betsy Crites and Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)*