



In defense of land: Environmental defenders on the frontlines of the global struggle for community self-determination and respect for the Earth

Photo: Butterflies painted in a mural by JODVID, as part of their resistance to Tahoe Resources. Artwork inspired by youth activist Topacio Reynoso.

The Earth is in the midst of an unprecedented ecological crisis, the impacts of which are being felt by communities the world over. Accompanied by growing political and economic instability and a startling resurgence of extreme nationalism, xenophobia, and right-wing ideology, the political challenges to transforming this reality have never been greater. As the new U.S. administration moves to strengthen corporate power in global governance, the well-being of all communities relies on local and international grassroots action. This work must be guided by the leadership of those most directly impacted – indigenous people, people of color, and frontline defenders who rise up to demand respect for the planet and real autonomy for their people.

In Guatemala, as in the rest of the Americas, indigenous communities have risked their lives for centuries in struggles to defend themselves against colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism—the very systems that have led to the crises we currently face. Today, Guatemalan communities face threats on multiple fronts: the country is one of the ten most affected by rising temperatures and extreme, unpredictable weather patterns and is also located in the most dangerous region in the world to be an environmental defender.

We at NISGUA understand that environmental defense is fundamentally a struggle for racial, economic, and social justice. We stand with those who are most directly impacted by the intersecting systems that drive environmental injustice—imperialism, capitalism, racism, patriarchy—and commit ourselves to playing a strategic role in supporting the liberatory visions of movements for community self-determination, human dignity, and respect for the Earth.

Environmental defense: Adapting new strategies in the face of adaptive attacks

According to the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEQUA), those defending indigenous rights and the environment are among those facing the highest number of attacks in the country. In their 2000 - 2015 analysis of national trends, they found a significant increase in the number of attacks directed against movements opposing the current resource extraction economic model. Trends point to higher numbers of threats, assaults, criminalization, and murders of those organizing to protect land against transnational mining and hydroelectric companies that are operating in their territories without consent. While the 1996 Peace Accords formally ended the 36-year internal armed conflict in the country, an alliance between the corporate sector and military elite has endured, allowing for conflict-era tactics used in the name of counterinsurgency to continue and be further adapted to attack land defenders today.

“Our Mother Earth – militarized, fenced-in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated – demands that we take action. Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a dignified way, in a way that protects life. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this Earth and of its spirits.” -- Berta Cáceres, 2015 Goldman Prize acceptance speech. Berta was a Lenca indigenous and environmental rights activist who was assassinated in Honduras on March 3, 2016.

Between 2015 and 2016, UDEFEGUA registered 716 attacks, 364 of which were against those defending the environment and rights to land. In 2016 alone, 68 land defenders were criminalized and five were killed.

“These murders have been facilitated by the absence of State protection mechanisms that favor defenders.” -- UDEFEGUA, 2015

Fighting for rights to ancestral lands and a clean, healthy environment is no small task in Guatemala. Environmental defenders have traditionally faced threats from elite landholders, and now face newer actors who have expanded into the region through narcotrafficking – all of whom enact a strict control of territory that does not respect the autonomy of communities.

Defenders are also directly challenging U.S. economic interests in the region that prioritize the prosperity of resource extraction companies and their shareholders. For decades, North American mining and oil companies have lobbied to set the terms of global trade, exploiting environmental regulations kept weak under neoliberalism to extract resources without concern for how their activities affect communities or the environment. U.S. and Canadian mining companies have worked to reform mining laws across Latin America to facilitate foreign investment – reforms that are often in direct conflict with constitutional guarantees. In Guatemala, the 1997 Mining Law opened the door for transnational companies to profit from extraction without accountability to local communities, reducing royalty rates to 1% and giving companies unlimited access to local water supplies for mining operations. By centering the rights of corporations, the law directly undermines hard-fought gains won in the Peace Accords, namely the recognition of indigenous identity and the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination.

The United States currently conditions economic support to Central America on expanding security and militarization as a “solution” to rising rates of migration. The Alliance for Prosperity, the U.S.’ current foreign policy focus in the region, claims to address the root causes of migration, such as poverty and violence, but emphasizes foreign investment over social programs. A significant portion of the multi-million dollar package allocated for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador is earmarked for state security forces. In the cases of Guatemala and Honduras in particular, these forces have a proven track record of colluding with private companies to enact violent and deadly repression of environmental defenders.

And yet, despite innumerable threats, communities are unwavering in their refusal to stay silent, and steadfast in their commitment to building creative, democratic, grassroots movements to challenge global capitalism on a local level.

WHAT KINDS OF ATTACKS ARE MADE AGAINST

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS?

A variety of aggressive tactics are used in an attempt to silence human rights and environmental defenders challenging racism, misogyny, inequality, and working for social justice. Attacks can come from state actors, such as the police and/or military, or non-state actors, such as national or international corporations, private security forces, organized crime, or paramilitary structures.

Attacks frequently go uninvestigated, creating a culture of impunity that empowers aggressors to use violence to forward their agenda.



STIGMATIZATION & DEFAMATION

delegitimizing the work of defenders, baseless claims in the media or in person, accusing them of being criminals, negatively portraying them as uneducated, profit-seeking individuals



CRIMINALIZATION

arbitrary criminal charges filed against defenders, under guise of terrorism, unlawful association, inciting crime, among others; excessive use of pre-trial detention and prolonged legal proceedings follow, with the goal of impeding their ability to organize



MILITARIZATION

use of militarized police or military forces against entire communities; leads to an environment of insecurity and repression, heightened trauma for massacre survivors; regularly includes suspension of certain civil liberties, arrests and physical attacks against known community leaders



TARGETED ATTACKS

psychological attacks such as surveillance, threats, harassment, intimidation, property damage, theft, and threat of criminal persecution; physical attacks such as abuse, arbitrary detention, rape, kidnapping, and murder

Sources:

UDEFEGUA, IACHR, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDS

Tahoe Resources: Perpetrating abuses in the name of development

Since Tahoe Resources' 2010 arrival in southeastern Guatemala, human rights and environmental defenders in the departments of Jalapa and Santa Rosa have faced a persistent wave of threats, attacks, and criminalization. Listed on both the U.S. and Canadian stock exchanges, Tahoe Resources is currently mining the world's third-largest silver deposit, located in the municipality of San Rafael las Flores. Ignoring the results of eight municipal referenda, in which communities clearly stated their opposition to mining in the region, Tahoe has continued its operations. By its second year of production in 2015, Tahoe had made more than \$320 million in silver sales.

The repression faced by those who have resisted Tahoe's presence in the region follows a pattern of threats, intimidation, and attacks against environmental defenders documented across the country. In 2013, the government remilitarized the region by enacting a state of siege, temporarily suspending certain constitutional rights while framing opposition to mining as a threat to national security. Since then, dozens of activists have faced defamation; nearly 90 people faced arrest; and many have been held in pre-trial detention for months before being released without charges. There have been countless psychological and physical threats and attacks, including murders. All of these strategies have been used in an attempt to quash local opposition and protect operations at Tahoe's Escobal mine.

NISGUA has been providing international accompaniment and advocacy support to communities resisting Tahoe Resources since 2010. For more information, visit our blog or TahoeOnTrial.net.

Youth in Resistance – JODVID

“As JODVID, we work for the good of our whole community. We look to defend our rights, our territory, and our environment – all of which are being affected as a result of policies and lust for power in the region.” - Noelia Jolón, JODVID

Despite the grave risks faced for speaking out, the movement in resistance to Tahoe Resources has engaged all sectors of local society. Born out of this struggle for community self-determination, Youth Organized in Defense of Life – JODVID – is a vibrant, Guatemalan youth organization that sees young people as active political participants with the right to be heard on issues affecting their territory. The group builds leadership by training fellow youth to take action to protect the environment, raises awareness about the dangers of deforestation and mining in the area, and educates their community on the importance of protecting waterways in the agricultural region of Santa Rosa and Jalapa.

Many of JODVID's members know firsthand the risks of speaking out against powerful economic interests. Their group was founded in 2015, after the murder of 16-year-old Topacio Reynoso, a local artist and vocal opponent to mining activities in the area. Topacio was attacked alongside her father, Alex Reynoso, by unknown assailants on April 13, 2014.

To date, there is little information about her murder, despite national and international calls for an investigation. Members of JODVID honor her memory by using her art and music to strengthen the resistance to Tahoe Resources and other environmental threats in the region.

“We don't want to live in places that are contaminated. We need to work towards a healthy future. But youth aren't only 'the future.' We're working on structural changes right now, from our perspectives and through our movements. We use art to counteract the lies that the mining company is telling.” – Franklin Valenzuela, JODVID

Photo left: Members of JODVID at a 2016 activity commemorating those who have been killed in the struggle to defend land, including their peer, Topacio.





“For us, as youth organized in the defense of life, we see the need for our movements to cross borders. People need to know what we are going through because of mining activities – a lack of water in the communities, a rise in social conflict, forced displacement, all backed by a corrupt state who fully supports these companies. Our movement has regional and national participation, but we strongly believe it is important to carry out advocacy work at a global level.” – Luis Fernando García, JODVID

Photo right: A mural painted by members of JODVID in commemoration of Topacio, using her artwork and words: “My beautiful corner of peace, Mataguesquintla, will smile again when no hero has to die in defense of life.”
Credit: Franklin Valenzuela

Luis Fernando García is one of the founding members of JODVID and is a survivor of an armed attack in front of the Escobal mine in 2013. He was shot by private security guards in the face and stomach during a peaceful protest and, after multiple surgeries, is one of the plaintiffs suing Tahoe Resources in Canadian courts for negligence. Through the diligence and perseverance of Luis Fernando and JODVID, together with other survivors, legal teams, and advocacy organizations, this will be one of the few times in North American history that a mining company will be sued in a domestic court for violence committed at their overseas operations.

Join us this fall on tour with another member of JODVID, Alex Escobar, as he shares stories from his community’s struggle to assert their self-determination and defend their territory against corporate power. Visit our website for more details and ways to get involved.

Guatemalan communities strengthening a global movement

In Guatemala and the world over, land defenders live at the crux of a global contradiction – their lives are threatened by private and state powers for defending the most basic element of life: water. Despite mounting evidence that our planet is in peril and growing indications of the crises to come, the capitalist framework continues to prioritize profit over people and the health of our planet. The current political panorama that we are facing requires people of conscience everywhere to actively dismantle the system in which the winners are resource extraction companies that poison our waters and violently dispossess indigenous and campesino communities of their land – the same communities who have proven themselves our planet’s greatest defense.

Organizations like JODVID are an integral part of the global movement to protect our Earth, and they face grave risks for speaking truth to power. There is a vision grounded in social and political transformation and the eradication of systems that threaten human dignity and community self-determination not only in Guatemala, but everywhere. We take inspiration from their courageous leadership and hold their struggle in our local movements for racial and environmental justice. We invite our supporters to join us in standing with JODVID and all environmental defenders in Guatemala, as we learn from their struggle and recommit to using international accompaniment and strategic advocacy to preserve and protect the political space needed for their crucial work in defense of land and life.



Photo: Members of JODVID carry a sign that reads: “March in memory of martyrs and victims, defenders of nature and life. We express our firm opposition to the presence of the military and we demand that they leave our territory.”

About Us

The Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) links people in the U.S. and Guatemala in the grassroots global struggle for justice, human dignity and respect for the Earth.