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Global Opinions

Guatemala needs to do more to stop the killings of indigenous activists

By Victoria Tauli-Corpuz

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Victoria Tauli-Corpuz is the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples.

I did an official 10-day visit from May 1-10 to Guatemala as part of my tasks as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples. In a span of five days, while I was there and after I left, Luis Marroquin, Jose Can Xol and Mateo Chamán Paau were [killed](#). They were killed in their fight for their rights to continue owning the lands they live in and live from. All of them are Q'eqchi' Maya.

Marroquin, a member of the national directorate and coordinator of the eastern region of the [Comité de Desarrollo Campesino \(CODECA\)](#), was killed in the town of San Luis Jilotepeque, Jalapa, on May 9. The next day, before I presented my end of mission report to the government and the media, Can Xol, a community leader of the [Comite Campesino de Desarrollo del Altiplano \(CCDA\)](#), was killed. This occurred in the community of Chotun Basila, Alta Verapaz, and was allegedly perpetrated by a member of the Chilte Cooperative seeking to claim the community's lands to expand their coffee plantations. On May 13, another CCDA member, Chamán Paau, was killed in the community of San Juan Tres Ríos.

These attacks followed statements by Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales criticizing the work of human rights defenders. In particular, he targeted Marroquin's organization, CODECA, which regularly holds mass protests against violations of the rights of the country's indigenous people. Civil society fears that the president's remarks could be seen as a go-ahead to attack human rights defenders.

In my visit I spoke with many people who are victims of criminalization and impunity. I went to Alta Verapaz, where thousands of people gathered to express their complaints against the construction of the [OXEC I and II hydroelectric dams](#) in the Cahabón River without consulting them.

I had the opportunity to visit the jail in Coban, Alta Verapaz, where I met Bernardo Caal, the leader of the struggle against the OXEC dams who faces multiple trumped-up charges of aggravated robbery and incitement to commit a crime, among many others. He was with five members of the community of Chotún Basilá who claimed they were just defending their rights to their lands. They were the targets of criminal charges filed by the Chilte Cooperative, the alleged perpetrator of the killing of Can Xol. While those who target human rights defenders typically escape justice, indigenous people are often treated as criminals simply for defending their lands.

Chamán Paau's community of Tres Ríos has also struggled. In 2016, another member of the community was killed — allegedly by the head of security for a private farm challenging Tres Ríos's land claims.

These are not isolated cases. Last year, an NGO, [Udefegua](#), documented [493 attacks](#) against human rights defenders in Guatemala, including [11 murders](#). Human rights defenders, especially those protecting their communities' lands and resources, suffer threats and attacks on a consistent basis. Last year, Global Witness [documented](#) at least 197 murders of land and environmental defenders all over the world. Historically around 40 percent of these murders have been indigenous people. And these numbers do not capture the full scope of the problem: the criminalization of indigenous peoples and killings in remote parts of the world that do not make news or reach reporters.

At the root of this violence is institutionalized racism and discrimination against Guatemala's indigenous population. Their inherent rights to their traditional lands, territories and resources are not recognized. Although half the country's population is indigenous, most still lack collective titles to the lands they have relied on for generations. Both the Chotún Basilá and Chamán Paau communities have been trying to resolve over 50 land conflicts with the government, but there has been little progress in securing their rights.

This has led to many indigenous people in Guatemala being forced from the only homes they've known without any compensation, relocation or assistance. It is, therefore, no wonder that around 40 percent of the country's [indigenous people](#) live in extreme poverty, and more than half of indigenous children are malnourished.

The extrajudicial killings and the abuse of criminal proceedings only continue to grow as a regressive legislative agenda and a shrinking democratic space put human rights defenders more at risk.

I condemn the killings in the strongest terms possible, and I call on the Guatemalan government to investigate these crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice. It is an imperative that these killings, injustices and gross human rights violations against indigenous peoples, who are the majority in Guatemala, be seriously addressed by the government.

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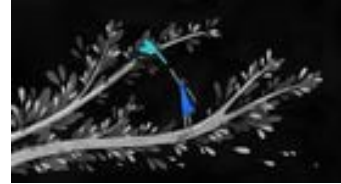
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