

# REFLECTING ON GENOCIDE 10 YEARS AFTER RÍOS MONTT'S CONVICTION

Photo by: Juan Rosales, Prensa Comunitaria.  
May 10th, 2023. Nebaj.



Luis Enrique Mendoza García, accused of genocide during the Ríos Montt dictatorship. Photo by: CALDH. March 2022

The 2013 Maya Ixil Genocide sentence is relevant beyond one ethnic group, and the crimes of one man. Their voice is a part of a constellation of Indigenous peoples – from Turtle Island to Iximulew – who have denounced the modern colonial world as genocidal by virtue of being based on heteropatriarchal nation-states and racial capitalism. By organizing in their respective lands, Indigenous peoples show us the path to protect life, preserve memory, and create justice: speak truth where you are; organize who you are with; and build trans-territorial struggles as you go.

On May 10th, 2013, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt's conviction for Genocide against the Maya Ixil people. We reject the Constitutional Court's overruling of the conviction under pressure from Guatemala's most powerful elites, and we lament that Ríos Montt died before the trial was complete. Despite these setbacks we find inspiration in the words of Maya Ixil communities "The sentence for Genocide belongs to the people, and it is still valid!"

The AJR is leading two other Genocide trials against three former high-ranking military officers. Hearings are scheduled for 2024.

### **Trial for Genocide during the dictatorship of Fernando Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982) in the Maya Ixil region:**

- Benedicto Lucas García\*: Chief of the General Staff of the Army. Brother of former President Romeo Lucas García.
- Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas\*: Head of Military Intelligence, G2.
- César Noguera Argueta: Chief of Military Operations, G3, died in October 2020 while waiting trial.

\*Both have been in prison since 2016, having been sentenced in 2018 to 58 years for crimes against humanity, aggravated sexual violence, and forced disappearance in the case of Emma and Marco Antonio Molina Theissen.

### **Trial for Genocide during the dictatorship of Ríos Montt (1982-83):**

- Luis Enrique Mendoza García: First accused of Genocide and crimes against humanity in 2011 with Ríos Montt and other members of his Military High Command, he remained a fugitive for seven years until he was arrested in 2019.

Today, a major concern is that Ríos Montt's daughter is a leading candidate in the presidential elections. Zury Ríos is a far-right Congressperson, with deep connections to military networks from the time of the Genocide, to the wealthiest elites in the country, and to the continental right-wing, including lobbyists and advisors in Washington DC., Brazil, Mexico, and El Salvador.

# 10 years after the Genocide sentence, what is justice?

In celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Ríos Montt sentence, the "Caravan of Memory and Justice" toured three towns in the Ixil region: Chajul, Cotzal, and Nebaj. The caravan underscored the political importance of bringing "untouchable" political figures to trial in a country as racist as Guatemala. The trial against Ríos Montt was a lesson in struggle, dignity, and courage of the Ixil people:

"The sentence is important for the Ixil people, for the peoples of Guatemala, and for the peoples of the world" Member of the Ixil Indigenous Mayor's Office of Cotzal

Since the Genocide sentence, the Guatemalan judicial system has been co-opted. As we write, the country is regressing into authoritarianism: prosecutors' offices dismantled, lawyers, prosecutors, and judges criminalized, and legal tools delaying cases. For this reason, the caravan highlighted ways to keep the struggles and the historical memory of the communities alive:

"Regardless of the dark maneuvers, through which the justice system is manipulated, the crime of Genocide was fully proven and remains in the historical record of our country. It is necessary to continue the fight against impunity, to vindicate the historical memory of all the massacred peoples, to continue the processes against war crimes against those guilty of Genocide that are still awaiting judgement, to build a country free of discrimination, abuse, impunity, and corruption"- Representative of the Coordinator of Ixil Organizations.

International solidarity, from NISGUA and others, has been fundamental to supporting the political and moral motivation to continue seeking justice. Solidarity has enabled exchanging perspectives and diverse experiences of struggle with Genocide survivors and with new generations.

Ten years after the historic sentence, the families, survivors and human rights organizations are telling Guatemala and the world that they remain steadfast in their search for justice.



*The Caravan of Memory and Justice at the central park of Chajul: they recalled the 1982 coup d'état, massacres, and genocide committed by the army in the communities. May 10th, 2023. Nebaj. Photo by: NISGUA*

"Since I have known NISGUA I have felt a great change in my understanding of the meaning of the anniversary of the Genocide sentence. From NISGUA I have learned a global language, I feel this change in myself and in the discourse of the struggle. It has given me strength. We are not doing well financially, but regarding faith, community, and encouragement we have a lot, that gives us a lot of strength." (Association for Justice and Reconciliation Member)



Photograph by CPR.Urbana. Commemorative activity for the release of political prisoners defending the territory in 2016 in Huehuetenango.

"We demand that the Government of Guatemala and national and international companies immediately cease all threats to plunder our common goods, the kidnapping, diversion and alteration of the Chixoy, Copón, and Cuatro Chorros Rivers for the construction of hydroelectric plants mentioned above." (ACODET member)

## The Genocide was a tactic to eliminate people who opposed extractive projects.

One of the impacts and objectives of the genocide in Guatemala was to dispossess communities of their territories as they were forcibly displaced to survive the war. The 1996 Peace Accords established the obligation of the Guatemalan state to return these territories to resettle the uprooted population. However, they did the opposite. All state companies and lands (aviation, water, railroads, ports, electricity, telephony) were sold to the highest bidders in a sweeping process of privatization. In other words, Guatemala entered neoliberalism, and with it, the next era of dispossession of territories.

The Genocide attempted to exterminate opposition to extractive projects, both by displacing Indigenous people from their territories and by killing/disappearing them. Today, those who survived live a constant struggle to defend their lives and the territories that continue to be at risk of dispossession. For example, ACODET, an organization of 37 communities in Alta Verapaz, has managed to prevent the installation of the Xalalá hydroelectric dam for 17 years. Recently, in their annual assembly, they presented unified concerns and demands in relation to their territories.

The communities and organizations that defend Mother Earth know how to protect her. They also know that they act in defiance of national and international companies, protected by Guatemalan state institutions. That is why it is important to support the movements defending territory. This support can take the form of disseminating statements and calls to action, amplifying defenders' demands, and educating yourself. By doing so, we are organizing to halt the neoliberal project of dispossession.

# CONSTELLATIONS OF LIFE: GENOCIDE OR DECOLONIZATION ON TURTLE ISLAND

Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island (North America) teach that the U.S. and Canada are settler-colonial states, and that all settler-colonial states are genocidal. These steal land by committing genocide against natives, and work with capitalist corporations to exploit and extract from the land. This makes life unlivable for human and more-than-human life in the short and long term, provoking the spiraling climate catastrophe we are in. Undoing this genocidal and ecocidal catastrophe demands decolonization. Decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization is a constellation of transformative place-based organizing led by Indigenous peoples, with a diverse coalition of comrades, to protect land, water, air, children, elders, memory, future, dignity, beauty, life.



Rally of 2,000 people at Minnesota State Capitol to oppose Line 3.  
Photo by: Rilyn Eischens/Minnesota Reformer.

## Stop Line 3

Through direct action, education and advocacy, indigenous people and comrades have organized to stop a pipeline that would destroy ecologies and communities in the Great Lakes region.

[stopline3.org](http://stopline3.org)

## International Mayan League

IML is composed by and works with Mayan diaspora peoples to preserve and protect culture, history, land and humanity through their cosmovisions and human rights work.

[mayanleague.org](http://mayanleague.org)

## Indigenous Environmental Network

IEN creates top tier research, education, mobilization and organization to combat climate change across Turtle Island. Their report "Indigenous Resistance Against Carbon" is groundbreaking.

[ienearth.org](http://ienearth.org)

## Protect Oak Flat

Oak flat is a sacred religious site in Arizona that's threatened by a copper mine and the US federal government. Apache Stronghold is defending it through legal, artistic and spiritual resistance.

[apache-stronghold.com](http://apache-stronghold.com)

## The Red Nation

TRN is a growing revolutionary organization of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples organizing campaigns, education and action on principles of anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, and anti-heteropatriarchy.

[therednation.org](http://therednation.org)

## WHAT ARE SOME WAYS THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THEIR COMRADES ARE PRACTICING DECOLONIZATION ON TURTLE ISLAND?

"When constellations work in international relationship to other constellations, the fabric of the night sky changes: movements are built, particularly if constellations of coresistance create mechanisms for communications, strategic movement, accountability to each other, and shared decision making practices." - Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), *As We Have Always Done*