

## **Journalist speaks on Guatemalan politics**

By Donald Canavaggio  
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Human rights and military accountability took center stage Thursday night when Iduvina Hernandez, a Guatemalan journalist, spoke at the Law School.

From 1982 to 1983, the government of Guatemala allegedly took part in organized genocide and the systematic destruction of hundreds of villages, which left hundreds of thousands dead. Despite a 1996 peace accord, the country still has many unresolved issues, as human rights activists work toward uncovering who is responsible for these events.

Hernandez discussed these issues Thursday night in the Law School, focusing on how human rights activists and lawyers are being continually threatened -- and in some cases, even attacked, as in Guatemala. As a consequence, their efforts are continually undermined, she said.

She emphasized that this pressure is coming directly from the government and is, in her opinion, a means of suppressing the truth for political reasons.

According to Hernandez, from 1997 to 2003, there were 387 attacks or threats committed against human rights activists. Of those attacks, 372 have taken place under the current government, she said.

Those "that have been most persecuted are those involved in investigating who [was] responsible for the massacres," she said.

Her speech underlined the importance of achieving a measure of justice. She said she believes that there must be "justice for the victims of the genocide," since "those people have a right to know why and have the right to know who" was responsible.

Hernandez noted that she had been personally affected by the violence, having witnessed her husband's death at the hands of military soldiers in 1984.

She also spoke out against the current presidential candidate, Efraim Rios-Mont, who served as dictator during the violence that occurred in 1982. Hernandez denounced him both for running for office, and for trying to suppress facts about the 1982 massacres.

The event was co-sponsored by several groups including the Penn Law International Human Rights Student Project and the Fox Leadership Program.

College senior and Fox Leadership Student Director Ben Cruse said he believes that it is "important to expose students to international leaders," as opposed to "solely... national leaders and national issues."

According to organizer and second-year Law student Matthew Brady, Hernandez's presentation was important given her unique role as an expert witness in human rights issues.

College sophomore Rodrigo Fuentes, a Guatemalan himself, said he understands her concern, explaining that there "is the danger that a dictator who was involved will be president of Guatemala."

Hernandez talked about many of the ways that keep information from coming to the surface, calling immunity laws "impunity laws."

"A democracy should make secrecy the exception and transparency the rule," she said. "But in many countries like Guatemala [it] is backward."

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