

Stop Land Evictions in Guatemala!

Guatemala is in the midst of an agrarian crisis that includes land conflicts, labor disputes, and a rich minority wielding enormous power over an impoverished and mainly indigenous Maya majority. Land has historically been at the center of cultural and economic life in Guatemala, but State policies are depriving the poorest citizens of access to land. Organized groups of poor Maya and non-Maya peasants, in an effort to survive drought, famine, and the lack of social and other services, have taken over land that is considered by the government to be legally owned by large landowners.

Many land occupations are in response to the government's disregard of peasant claims, judicial orders, labor and salary disputes, or historical titles to land. Timeless experience has shown that the government does not listen to peasants and Maya indigenous farmers, but rather to influential landowners.

During the 2003 Presidential elections, promises were made by the current President, Óscar Berger, to find solutions to the widening agrarian crisis and land conflicts in the countryside.

The first of the over 40 land evictions under the Berger administration was carried out just days after the new government was inaugurated in January 2004. In late February and again in March 2004, after receiving pressure from national and international human rights groups and after having publicly re-launched the stalled Peace Accords, President Berger publicly stated that he would halt land evictions, yet land evictions continued. In early June, thousands of poor peasants and indigenous groups organized a national strike to protest the State policy of land evictions, which led to the promise of a ninety-day land evictions halt during which the government promised to make certain concrete advances.

Before the ninety days had completed, police raided land on the southern coast and violently evicted 1,500 families during which at least 10 poor peasants and police were killed. Houses, crops, and animals were burned, following the trend of the most violent evictions. In addition, journalists covering the operation were assaulted and their equipment stolen and destroyed. Police are now in custody for beating an elderly man to death and jumping over his body and yelling "Victory! Victory!"

Extrajudicial executions and other generalized violence have led Indigenous groups to comment that the past nine months of violent land evictions have been frighteningly similar to the "scorched earth" policy and brutal repression of the 1980's when hundreds of thousands of mainly Indigenous people were brutally massacred or otherwise disappeared by the U.S. supported Guatemalan military.

The Guatemalan Interior Minister, Carlos Vielman, just days before the land eviction on the southern coast expressed his commitment to finding solutions to agrarian problems, and days after remarked that the eviction serve as "an example" for poor peasants.

The over 40 violent land evictions that have been carried out by the government in the past nine months have left thousands without homes or a means of survival and have sparked a national crisis. With more than 50 judicial orders pending to carry out land evictions, the Guatemalan government needs to come to its senses and stop its divisive, repressive, and violent policy of land evictions.

Stop Land Evictions in Guatemala!

To the Honorable President Berger,

Due to the ongoing repression against land activists and the continued land evictions which now number over 40 and have left thousands of people homeless and without the means to survive, I want to express my deep concern about the land eviction policy that your government is carrying out.

In both February and March of 2004, your government promised to halt land evictions and look at ways to resolve land conflicts, yet violent land evictions continued. Again in June 2004, your government agreed to a ninety land-eviction halt during which concrete advances were to be made and proposals set forth.

Before the ninety days had completed, police raided land on the southern coast and violently evicted 1,500 families during which at least 10 poor peasants and police were killed. Houses, crops, and animals were burned, following the trend of the most violent evictions. In addition, journalists covering the operation were assaulted and their equipment stolen and destroyed. Police are now in custody for beating an elderly man to death and jumping over his body and yelling "Victory! Victory!"

The extent of violence, fear, and intimidation used while carrying out these land evictions is of particular concern. Indigenous and peasant groups characterize this policy as a manifestation of the government's "scorched earth" policy of the 1980's. The burning of homes and clothing, and the destruction or confiscation of livestock and agricultural tools are serious and fundamental human rights violations.

The over 40 violent land evictions that have been carried out by your government in the past nine months have left thousands without homes or a means of survival and have sparked a national crisis. With more than 50 judicial orders pending to carry out land evictions, the Guatemalan government needs to come to its senses and stop its divisive, repressive, and violent policy of land evictions.

I ask that you put a halt to land evictions throughout the country and take concrete steps to address agrarian and land conflicts immediately.

Sincerely,

Name _____ Date _____ Address _____