

How Guatemala is sliding into chaos in the fight for land and water

Tuesday 18 September 2018, by [VIDAL John](#) (Date first published: 19 August 2018).

A farmers' leader shot in the back is one of 18 activists killed this year, targeted for opposing evictions, logging and mining



Land rights protesters demanding the resignation of President Jimmy Morales in Guatemala City in 2017. Photograph: Esteban Biba/Epa-Efe/Rex Shutterstock

At 9am on 9 May, Luis Arturo Marroquín walked out of a shop in the main square of the small town of San Luis Jilotepéque in central [Guatemala](#). Eyewitnesses say a black Toyota Hilux pick-up then drove up and, in full view of passersby, two men wearing hoods shot Marroquín repeatedly in the back.

The vehicle sped off but was identified and, within hours, police had stopped and reportedly questioned the men and found the weapons. But since then, no arrests have been made or charges levelled and the investigation has stalled.

Marroquín was a Q'eqchi' Mayan, and a leader of Codeca, a group of indigenous farmers now gaining political ground by defending people from [evictions, land grabs and pollution resulting from mines, hydro dams](#), logging, and huge palm oil and sugar cane developments.

He is one of 18 human rights and indigenous "defenders" to have been murdered so far this year in a wave of rural violence. Of these, 13 were involved in land conflicts and nine were Codeca leaders. Two were journalists investigating disputes and of the seven people killed in the month following Marroquín's death, one died in a church, another was rammed by a truck and a third was murdered while doing the shopping. Others were stabbed or hacked to death. Few people have been arrested, let alone convicted.

"Everyone knows who the killers are," said Maria Perez, Marroquín's widow, in the modest house near Carrizal in Jalapa state that she and Luis built on a steep hillside 30 years ago. "I was warned that he would be killed but I did not take it seriously. All the authorities knew it was going to happen but I didn't believe it. He had talked about the danger of his work and how if he was going to die it

would be for his community,” she said.

But a high-level, UN-backed mission to Guatemala, which included the *Observer*, will suggest in a report to be published this week that although the men may have been killed by local hitmen, the killings have probably been orchestrated by more powerful political and financial interests, with links to the drug trade and the military.

They fear that if action is not taken, Guatemala could descend into the sort of violence and political chaos seen in neighbouring Honduras and nearby Nicaragua.

The killings are just the tip of a pyramid of abuses faced by people defending their land and environment, says Mike Taylor, director of the International Land Coalition (ILC), the global alliance of UN agencies and 278 civil society and farmers’ groups that spent a week hearing evidence from four communities, as well as judicial and government bodies.

“There is a culture of impunity. Leaders are being identified, arrested, detained and criminalised. People are being evicted illegally, even if they have title to land. Hundreds have been threatened with death and many thrown into prison without evidence on charges of murder and terrorism.



[Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[Pinterest](#)

Luis Marroquín’s widow, Maria Perez, and son Luis.

“Anyone who opposes mines, evictions, palm oil plantations or who even takes part in roundtables to find solutions to the rising tide of violence against land rights defenders is likely to be targeted,” Taylor said.

“We have seen evidence of criminality, prosecution, false imprisonment and killings. These are not random acts of violence but the systematic persecution of people who have been standing up to defend their land.

“At the base of the violence against defenders is the decision by the state to use land, water and natural resources not for the benefit of the many but the very few.”

James Loughran of Dublin-based Front Line Defenders, a member of the mission – which also took evidence from the UN and people held in prison – said: “People feel abandoned. No one is listening to them. They have no confidence in the justice system. Their leaders are being victimised and attacked, their voices silenced.”

Last year saw [197 killings of environmental activists worldwide](#), according to human rights group Global Witness. Brazil, with 57 people killed, and the Philippines, with 48, were the two deadliest countries. Guatemala has now become one of the most dangerous.

According to the NGO Udefegua, which monitors official records, there were 483 serious acts of aggression against people fighting for their lands in 2017. More than 300 evictions have been registered in 2018.

Omar Jerónimo, who works with the indigenous farm group Nuevo Día in the Chiquimula department, says he has been forced into hiding by death threats, possibly from companies linked to large infrastructure projects he has opposed.

"We have reports that ex-military personnel and [drug] gangs have arrived in our area. There have been 52 death threats in the last three months, 22 people have been criminalised, two people have been thrown in prison and 27 have been attacked," he said.

"Over 20 of us have a price on our head. I have been told mine is \$100,000 but I can be killed for \$100. Last month my car was sprayed with bullets. We have been warned that the assassinations will go on. We are all scared but you should not let fear stop you working in the community."

Securing justice or protection from the state is nearly impossible, say observers. "There is a climate of impunity where human rights defenders are concerned," said a senior government official who asked not to be named. "Justice is partial at both local and national level. The judiciary is close to business. It is always in favour of business. The lack of an independent judiciary is a real problem."

Taylor said there was no justice for the poor. "The very institutions supposed to protect them against human rights abuses are instead used to criminalise and further persecute them."

Mario Minera, former head of mediation at the government's ombudsman's office, said there were at least 1,000 land conflicts raging in Guatemala. "The numbers are increasing. They are all linked directly to the concessions given to companies. In all cases there are international companies involved," he said.

"The whole country has been opened to concessions for mining, sugar cane, palm oil to provide exports. Rivers have been diverted, others are drying up. Access to land and water is denied. The resources are in the hands of a very few people. It is a predatory model of economic development which is penalising the rural poor and does not benefit communities or the common good."

Land reform has been painfully slow since the Guatemalan civil war, which ended in 1996 with a peace agreement that promised to return land to indigenous and peasant farmers, from whom it had been taken over 200 years before. Instead, there has been only a trickle of cases and it remains one of the world's most unequal countries.

"We are seeing systematic repression, not random acts of violence," a senior diplomat said. "The government is identifying the leaders of the opposition and then arresting them. Even the families of victims are afraid to speak about the crimes. Guatemala could go towards becoming a dictatorial state. The formation of armed gangs which has been taking place could provoke confrontations similar to what has happened in Nicaragua."

Back in Jalapo state, the man accused of ordering the murder of Luis Marroquín denies his involvement and, like the human rights defenders now being widely attacked, pleads for justice. He told the *Observer*: "I only ask that [the investigation] be carried out in accordance with the law. The social networks are used to judge me directly by saying that I am the murderer. I do not know who killed Luis, but he was not my enemy. There are politicians and people who hate me. I, too, fear for my life."

A history of conflict

Guatemala's largely indigenous population say their rights have been violated since the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, dispossessing their communities and driving them into the less fertile highlands.

Guatemala gained independence in 1821 and there followed a century of struggle between liberals and US-backed conservatives. In 1954 the CIA deposed leftwing president Jacobo Árbenz to protect the interests of America's United Fruit Co, whose presence had led to the country being seen as a "banana republic".

Rebellion followed and in 1960 a brutal 36-year civil war began. This saw about 200,000 largely indigenous people killed by the military, and hundreds of thousands of people migrating to the US.

A peace agreement in 1996 should have led to land redistribution, but a handful of powerful families still dominates the economy, and Guatemala remains one of the world's least equal and most violent countries, with the largest 2.5% of farms occupying more than 65% of the land.

Economic integration forced on Guatemala by the US and global bodies have further opened the country to foreign-backed mining, hydro and other extractive industries, forcing more evictions of indigenous peoples and leading to more violence and inequality.

John Vidal

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/19/guatemala-fight-for-land-water-defenders-lmining-l-oging-eviction>