

Anatomy Of A Misleading Globe & Mail Article About Guatemala

January 9, 2008, by Grahame Russell

Below, you can read “ANATOMY OF A SHOOTOUT”, a Globe and Mail newspaper article that movingly describes the endemic situation of violence, crime and impunity in Guatemala. Unfortunately, the article is misleading in a number of harmful ways.

SOURCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND IMPUNITY

Since the 1954 USA-orchestrated coup ended Guatemala’s only real democratic government in its history, the main source of human rights violations and impunity in Guatemala has been the economic and military elites that have long been supported by and continue to maintain mutually beneficial military and economic relations with the “international community”, primarily the USA and also Canada and a host of global companies, banks and investors.

The article makes no mention of these international relations, leading the reader to a possible conclusion of pity: ‘What a poor, messed up country that Guatemala is!’ A reader might conclude the people of Guatemala are pathologically programmed to violence and killing, ignoring how the “international community” benefits from unjust military and economic relations with Guatemala’s elites, contributing to the violence, poverty and impunity.

CANADA THE GOOD

In the first paragraph, the article describes how “death stalks the land” and how “Canadians are trying valiantly to stop it.” Some Canadians are indeed involved in serious work to expose and help put an end to the human rights violations and impunity in Guatemala. Yet, the article makes no mention of how other more powerful and influential ‘Canadians’ are profiting from the unjust economic development model, benefiting from the very impunity that the article describes.

There are over a dozen Canadian companies (Goldcorp Inc. and Skye Resources [formerly INCO nickel company] being the most infamous) involved in mining operations that have been denounced in Guatemala and internationally as contributing to environmental and community development harms and human rights violations (including some killings), while reaping (in the case of Goldcorp) huge profits for company directors, shareholders and a wide range of Canadian individual and institutional investors.

While pointing out the endemic poverty of a majority of Guatemalans, the article makes no mention of how the Canadian and USA governments, in conjunction with the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, have pushed “free” trade economic development policies on Guatemala.

This “free” trade development model exploits and keeps in place the poverty and landlessness of a majority of Guatemalans, while benefitting the investor and business interests of the Guatemalan elites, North American companies and the consumer interests of North American purchasers.

HOPELESS FATALISM

Spread throughout the article are quotes of fatalism (“This is what we do in Guatemala, ... We kill one another”; “More killings. It's a sad part of our existence here”; “We all have our day to die, and in Guatemala it is often sooner than it should be”; “What can you do? ... This is the way it is here. Unfortunately, killing is easy in Guatemala”;))

The hopelessness stems only from the misrepresentation of what are the underlying causes of such structural injustices and of what people are doing to put an end to the impunity.

In the 1940s and 50s, Guatemalan people struggled courageously to oust their decades-long USA-backed tyranny and elect two democratic governments --- only to watch in horror as the USA orchestrated the 1954 coup in the interests of North American companies like the United Fruit Company and, a few years later, the INCO nickel company.

This coup put in place the oligarchic-military regime that killed and disappeared over 250,000 people (mainly in the late 1970s and 80s) and, according to the United Nations Truth Commission (1999) carried out Genocide in certain Mayan regions of the country.

Today, North American governments and businesses happily deal with essentially the same oligarchic- military regime, promoting mining, other resource extraction and “free” trade deals, all the while claiming publicly they are abiding by the rule of law and rules of democracy in a country where impunity is the norm and the institutions of democracy basically do not work.

MISLEADING AND DISEMPOWERING

While the article provides a moving portrayal of the daily crime, insecurity and impunity in Guatemala, these things do not happen in a narrow, national context.

Ignoring most of the underlying causes of this difficult situation, the article ‘invisibilizes’ the direct and indirect roles that the USA and Canada play in helping keep in place this unjust and violent situation, leaving the reader helpless in terms of what they might do to get involved in efforts to end the multiple ways our countries, and some businesses and investors contribute to and benefit from the insecurity, poverty and impunity in Guatemala.

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WHAT TO DO: see below. Please re-distribute this analysis and article far and wide. If you want on-off this elist: info@rightsaction.org.

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ANATOMY OF A SHOOTOUT

By Gary Mason, Globe and Mail, January 4, 2008

[It is Wednesday, Nov. 14, 2007. Gustavo Veliz is taking in a company truck for servicing. Fines Barrios has told his wife he's popping out to pick up some lumber. Yet by 9:30 a.m., both have died in a shootout on a busy downtown street. Welcome to Guatemala, where death stalks the land ☐ and Canadians are trying valiantly to stop it.]

Guatemala City -- By 9:30 a.m., the streets are jammed. People hang out the doors of the old red buses that rumble along the main thoroughfares. Vendors are setting up shop on their usual corners, as shotgun-toting security guards take up position in front of everything from banks to run-down shoe stores.

Gustavo Veliz is at the wheel of a beige, 2005 Toyota Tacoma, a shiny pickup that stands out among the vehicles from decades past that crowd the streets of Guatemala's impoverished capital. It is owned by his employer, an armoured-car company called Transporte de Valores y Servicios (TVS).

Mr. Veliz turns down 13th Street, one of the busiest in the downtown core, and is making his way past the yellow and white colonial façade of what used to be the medical faculty of San Carlos University. Now, it is a high school ringed by a black wrought-iron fence. Students sit under the cool canopy of the property's pine trees.

Juan Garcia is opening the flaps of the cart he uses to transport the goods he has sold for years at the corner of 13th Street and 2nd Avenue ☐ Viceroy, Payasos and Marlboro cigarettes, bags of water, cookies, gum, Tampico Citrus Punch. Mr. Garcia is hanging the last bags of tortilla chips when the morning din is pierced by what sounds to him like firecrackers.

The traffic light at the corner is green for those travelling along 13th and for a few minutes the cars keep moving. But then they begin to stop, and Mr. Garcia sees a beige pickup about 20 metres away from where he is standing. Its passenger window has been

shot out and there is a body on the pavement beside it. A pool of blood is forming around the head.

Soon police arrive and cordon off the area. The media take up position behind yellow police tape. Television cameramen and newspaper photographers start taking pictures of the dead man. He is wearing brown cowboy boots and blue jeans. His bulky beige jacket is hiked up, exposing his lower back.

Onlookers gather. Cars start honking. Word circulates that there is another body inside the truck.

An old man stands on the corner, watching the police search for bullet casings. He is wearing a white cowboy hat and his chestnut skin looks well lived in. "This is what we do in Guatemala," he says in Spanish to no one in particular. "We kill one another." Then he walks on.

THE CRISIS

They do kill one another in Guatemala, at a staggering pace. Over the past four years, the number of people found dead in the streets or hung from trees or pulled from ditches has climbed to mind-numbing levels.

In 2002, before the violence began to escalate, roughly 2,900 people were killed. Last year, the total reached 6,033, although international observers believe that it could be as high as 8,000 (the National Civil Police doesn't count people who are injured in an attack but die later in hospital). Canada, with a little less than three times Guatemala's population of 13 million, had only 605 homicides in 2006.

According to statistics kept by the United Nations, there were 1.85 homicides in Canada last year for every 100,000 people. The U.S. figure was 5.7, while Russia, considered one of the more dangerous countries in the world, recorded 20. Guatemala's was almost 21/2 times that: an estimated 47 per 100,000 people.

Every day on the streets of this city of 1.2 million, citizens are robbed at gunpoint. It happens while they sit in their cars, and while they ride the bus. Already this year, 76 Guatemalan bus drivers have been killed for their cash boxes. The crime wave is so bad that virtually every business in the city has armed guards, some mere teenagers, who now outnumber the police 3 to 1.

The sense of danger is tangible. Many cars have tinted windows to deflect the attention of would-be robbers. Foreigners, even those staying in safe neighbourhoods, are warned not to walk alone, especially at night. After dark, shots ring out outside the best international hotels.

It wasn't supposed to be this way more than a decade after a 36-year civil war left more than 200,000 dead. The 1996 peace accord between the military and left-wing guerrillas was intended to lay the foundation for an era of peace and prosperity. It has done anything but.

A week from Monday, the recently elected Alvaro Colom will be inaugurated as the country's first left-leaning president in more than half a century. But things here are sufficiently precarious that even Venezuela's great populist, Hugo Chavez, now says he may not attend the ceremony — he is afraid of being assassinated.

The situation is so desperate that the Guatemalan government has turned to Canada for help. Acting under the direction of the Law Courts Education Society of B.C., a non-governmental organization originally established to educate Canadians about their justice system, a small group has been quietly working here to build a criminal-justice system from the ground up.

It faces an enormous challenge. Poverty is rampant and fuels much of the street crime. Hard figures are almost impossible to find, but the UN estimates that more than 50 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. And yet most non-governmental agencies operating in Guatemala claim the figure is closer to 80 per cent.

According to Madrid-based Latin American analyst Ivan Briscoe, however, there are other reasons for the recent upswing in violence. —Grand conspiracy theories are not needed to observe a certain primitive logic here,— he writes in a paper for the Foundation for International Relations and Foreign Dialogue. —Organized crime and corrupt police institutions appear to have substantial control over the country's homicide rate.—

It is estimated that 60 to 90 per cent of the cocaine entering the United States from Colombia passes through Guatemala, where ruthless gangsters have set up what amounts to a toll booth and left their drug-covered fingerprints everywhere: in the ranks of the police, the judiciary and even president-elect Colom's own party, the National Union of Hope.

At the same time, a brutal war has broken out between Mara 18 and Mara Salvatruchas (or MS-13) — which RCMP experts describe as two of the world's most vicious gangs — and there is still much illicit violence committed by the state. Not only are rogue elements frustrated by the judicial system's shortcomings believed to be behind many homicides here, but recent surveys show that Guatemalans largely support the —social cleansing— of undesirables, from gang members to street kids.

Even so, a year ago last month, the United Nations and the government agreed to establish an independent International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), with a mandate to investigate any illegal security organizations.

All this adds up to a murderous scenario that is reflected to some degree in neighbouring Honduras and El Salvador and keeps this region dangerous and unstable.

“Let there be no doubt,” Mr. Briscoe writes. “As the world forgets Central America, a tragedy is forming.”

THE SLEUTHS

Dora Amely Gaitan has to wait for the police to finishing combing the area for bullet fragments and fingerprints before she can examine the bodies on 13th Street. Ms. Gaitan is a forensic analyst for the Ministerio Publico, Guatemala's Ministry of Justice. Here, prosecutors head teams of crime-scene investigators who work on cases as a unit and follow them from start to finish.

It is her job to do a preliminary assessment of the injuries sustained by victims at the scene before the bodies are shipped off to the morgue to be examined by a coroner. More often than not, she is counting bullet or stab wounds.

Minutes before being called out to the shooting, Ms. Gaitan was standing in a small conference room at the ministry offices. The morning meeting of her investigative team had just broken up and she was telling a couple of reporters how the early days on the job were especially difficult for her because of the often gruesome nature of the homicide scenes she attended.

Short and stocky, with collar-length black hair, muscular arms and a reluctant smile, Ms. Gaitan is still haunted by the killing of a woman and her three children that she investigated early on.

“In the five years I've been working here, it remains the worst,” she says through an interpreter. “The look of fear was imprinted in the children's faces. The terror they felt stayed with them in their corpses. The eldest was 11.”

And there is nothing Dora Gaitan hasn't seen. It is not uncommon, she says, for children to be tortured in front of a parent before all family members are killed. Often, the child's fingernails are ripped off, one of the more sadistic techniques employed by criminals, although women are often raped and mutilated and there have been reports of babies being cut out of the wombs of their mothers.

In comparison, the carnage on 13th Street seems pretty standard. “It looks like it was a carjacking gone wrong,” Ms. Gaitan says with a sigh. “So now two people are dead. More killings. It's a sad part of our existence here.”

Police believe that the man on the ground was a would-be robber shot in the head by Gustavo Veliz, who is now stretched out on the Tacoma's front seat with three bullets in

his chest and his fingers wrapped around his handgun. The theory is that he was killed by the robber's accomplice, who blasted through the passenger window and then sped away.

Carjackings are rampant in Guatemala City, with drivers of newer, more expensive cars especially at risk. At any moment, while waiting at a stop light in particular, there can be a tap on the window by someone with a gun. Most people have the sense just to get out and hand over the keys. But some refuse. Apparently, Mr. Veliz was one of them. As investigators continue to collect evidence, two men arrive. One is big and has white hair; he is wearing a grey, short-sleeved golf shirt and has a walkie-talkie in his front pocket. His companion, who is younger and smaller, takes one look at the truck and begins to sob. "No, no, no," he cries, grabbing the iron fence.

The tall man is Mr. Veliz's boss, Manuel Jose Chacon. The younger man is their co-worker and Gustavo Veliz's best friend, Pedro Corado Hernandez. As Mr. Chacon puts an arm around him, he continues to cry: "No, no, no."

Minutes later, a woman runs past the police tape. She is striking, with long dark hair and a honey complexion, and her salmon slacks and white blouse give her a North American look unlike anyone else at the crime scene. Before she can reach the truck, she is cut off by a police officer. She puts her hand to her mouth and starts sobbing. It is Maria Veliz, Gustavo's wife.

At about this point, Cesar Amaya happens upon the scene. A doctor who practises in the neighbourhood, he is in his 70s and cuts a quirky figure with his obviously dyed, blondish hair and colourful clothes (green velour jacket, bright yellow shirt, red tie and blue jeans). He shakes his head in quiet disgust. "They kill themselves every week on this street," he says. "What's happening in this city is a tragedy. An everyday tragedy."

THE CANADIANS

Rick Craig's association with Guatemala dates from the 1980s. A long-time international aid worker, he once tried to assist Guatemala's teachers union, which was being destroyed during the civil war. After the peace accord in 1996, the Vancouver-based Mr. Craig brought in a delegation of B.C. officials to see what, if anything, could be done to help the shattered nation rebuild.

After that trip, it was decided that, while many institutions needed help, perhaps the justice system needed it the most. "During the war, it had essentially become a tool of the repression," says Mr. Craig, sipping a coffee in Guatemala City's Hotel Princess.

"As part of the peace process, it was agreed Guatemala needed to move toward a more open, transparent and accountable system. I thought we could help them do that and they were more than happy to have someone come down and provide them with some direction."

Initially, Mr. Craig's program for change involved conducting seminars for prosecutors on the fundamentals of something Canadians almost take for granted: oral trials. Oral trials were new. For most of the civil war, criminal cases were done all on paper, conducted behind closed doors by judges and lawyers.

But when Cal Deedman, a Crown counsel from the B.C. Ministry of the Attorney-General, was seconded in 2000 to help Mr. Craig, the two men realized that first they had to train the police how to collect evidence that would help prosecutors build their cases. The challenges were enormous: Police didn't have even the most basic crime-scene tools. A pair of pliers was a luxury. Even getting to the scene was often a chore, with some investigators forced to take a city bus, only to arrive and find everything had been trampled over or tampered with by passersby. Also, investigators could take only three photographs at a time because they were required to make their 12-exposure films stretch to four homicides.

Witness statements were non-existent; Guatemalans feared, quite legitimately, they would be subject to reprisals, including death, if they talked to police. Consequently, unless caught in the act, people were rarely convicted. Until recently, just over 1 per cent of Guatemala's homicides resulted in criminal charges. (The figure is now closer to 2 per cent, thanks largely to the Canadians' efforts.) That, according to the RCMP, compares with a prosecution rate of 70 to 80 per cent in Canada.

The Mounties have been of great assistance to Mr. Craig, teaching more than 1,300 Guatemalan prosecutors, investigators and police officers in the past few years how to manage a crime scene and how to collect and process evidence. "We have a long way to go," says Mr. Craig, finishing his breakfast. "But our efforts appear to be paying off, if only by small measures."

THE MORGUES

People whose lives come to a violent end — at least, those whose bodies are found — wind up in the morgue and, in Guatemala City, which morgue very much depends on their station in life.

The destination for those who have medical insurance is the one attached to the Social Security Hospital, the best in the city. Of the 13 million Guatemalans, just over one million have medical insurance. Gustavo Veliz, 38, is among them.

Fines Aaron Aroche Barrios, the robber, is not. His body is taken to the public morgue, a brown single-storey building that looks plain on the outside, but has a reputation as one of the goriest places in the country.

When his body arrives several hours after the shooting, the stench of death is overpowering. It is on most days. There are bodies in black garbage bags stacked in a

storage area. They have already had autopsies and are waiting to be picked up by family or friends. Other bodies lie unclothed on rusty metal gurneys in an adjacent holding area where a metre-long figurine of Jesus nailed to the cross hangs from a wall. Some have been reviewed by pathologists and sewn back up. Others are waiting to be rolled into the central examination room.

The autopsies are performed on green-tiled tables that are tilted to allow the blood to reach the drains on the floor. Still, there is blood everywhere – the room looks more like a slaughterhouse than a medical facility.

Three overhead fans try to keep the stench down, but this morgue has no refrigeration units, which is why the air is putrid and bodies have to be claimed within 72 hours or they are taken to the cemetery.

The pathologist finds a single bullet in the brain of Mr. Barrios. The only other wounds to speak of are the cuts to his face suffered when he fell. After the autopsy, his body is put back on a creaky cart and moved to the holding room to be collected.

The morgue with Mr. Veliz is smaller but much cleaner. His body arrives in a hearse sent by a funeral parlour hired by the family – it's either that or the back of a police pickup. There is no coroner's service in Guatemala City.

Mr. Veliz's body is first X-rayed, something not done at the public morgue, then placed on a thick, 15-centimetre-wide leather strap attached to an iron bar and a large scale. The contraption makes up the morgue's primitive weighing station. Around the corner is a small room that looks like a country pantry. On the shelves are jars filled with body parts and organs: eyes, fingers, livers, slivers of a lung. On the floor is a green pail containing internal organs that have just been analyzed as part of an investigation.

After being weighed, the body is moved to one of the two clean tables and examined by Dr. Oscar Morales Cahuec. His autopsy confirms what the X-rays showed and Ms. Gaitan determined at the scene: that Mr. Veliz died from three gunshots to abdomen. Two of the bullets exited the body, one did not.

As autopsies go, it is fairly straightforward. Dr. Cahuec has seen homicide victims arrive in much worse shape. In Guatemala, a machete is often the weapon of choice and gunshot wounds are usually to the face, where death is better assured.

Afterward, the body goes into one of the morgue's two refrigerated storage units, and then is picked up that evening by family members.

Meantime, back at the Ministerio Publico, investigators analyze the evidence collected at the crime scene. Gustavo Veliz's Korean-made handgun should be able to fire 15

shots in quick succession. He got off one, but the shell casing became wedged in the chamber. Investigators figure that he probably tried to fire more shots but couldn't. He was effectively defenceless when he died.

THE POLITICIAN

There are many unenviable jobs in Guatemala. President is one. Attorney-General is right behind it. Juan Luis Florido is the man in charge of the criminal-justice system in which no one has much faith — a suggestion he doesn't contest. He knows the prosecution rate in Guatemala is one of the lowest in the civilized world. He knows that government corruption is rampant and that even his own department isn't clean. He also knows that, as the system continues to sputter, violence spins out of control.

“But we're making change,” Mr. Florido says, sitting at the head of a nine-metre oak table in the boardroom of the Ministerio Publico, which is located in one of the city's poorest areas. “It comes slow, perhaps, but it's coming nonetheless.”

But the fact that many of the changes will be fruitless if additional resources are not found soon is one of Mr. Florido's great laments. “Our prosecutors are trying,” he says, adjusting his dark-framed designer glasses. “We are making headway. In 2006, there were only 57 formal indictments for premeditated murder in Guatemala. In 2007, already there have been 118 formal charges laid — that's a 107-per-cent increase. The number could easily be higher.”

As could the conviction rate. It is about 50 per cent, which means that fewer than 30 people have been punished in more than 6,000 homicide cases.

The problem, Mr. Florido says, is a lack of manpower. There are 15,000 outstanding arrest warrants in Guatemala, about 400 of which are for suspected murderers. But the National Civil Police has only 25 officers to execute the warrants, as well as just 85 officers in its homicide unit. “El Salvador has half of our population and Costa Rica has a third of our population, and they have more than 2,000 investigators each to deal with roughly the same amount of cases we have. We probably need 5,000 to deal with our needs.”

It's no wonder that morale in the department is low, but to some extent, the situation is beyond Mr. Florido's control. Guatemala has some of the lowest taxes in Latin America. The country is effectively run by a small band of oligarchs whose businesses benefit from ridiculously light taxation, while the average person lives in grinding poverty. Most observers believe a significant hike in sales or income taxes, even to improve law enforcement, would send much of the population into the streets.

Still, progress is being made. Mr. Florido's ministry now has 50 crime-scene trucks outfitted with modern equipment, up from zero just a couple of years ago. It also has

330 crime-scene analysts and forensic experts, double the number a few years ago, and there is a plan to add another 400 as well as 50 more trucks.

“But I can't tell you how important the support from the Canadian government, the Law Courts Education Society, the B.C. government, the Mounted Police has been in terms of resources and training and getting all this going,” he says. “Because of it, there has been a new beginning of the criminal-justice system.”

THE BOSS

Five days after the shooting, Manuel Jose Chacon is still in mourning. The big, beefy boss of TVS sits behind his desk talking about Gustavo Veliz as if he were a son. “He was a happy person all the time,” Mr. Chacon says through an interpreter. “He had a position in the company where you had to have a lot of character, you had to be very strong because you had to deal with all sorts of people.

“What happened is terrible, just terrible. The people here are devastated. They cannot believe Gustavo is gone — neither can I.”

Working for TVS is not without risks. The company delivers valuables, sometimes money, for all kinds of businesses throughout the city. The deliveries are made in unmarked armoured vehicles, but the morning he died, Mr. Veliz was driving a company pickup used for more mundane errands. In fact, he was just going to have a new battery installed. Still, the vehicle looked new, and that alone made it a target.

As he describes the dead man's two young children, Mr. Chacon puts his elbows on his desk and rubs both eyes in a futile attempt to stanch his tears. Then he apologizes for the display of emotion and adds: “He was special. Anything he wanted, I gave to him because he was always thinking of other people. The death of Gustavo hurts my soul.” Suddenly, his mood shifts, as though he is ashamed of his tears or worried his staff might see him, and he seems angry and resentful. “In Guatemala, they don't just kill the bad guys,” he says. “It's anyone who can be killed. We all have our day to die, and in Guatemala it is often sooner than it should be.

“I personally was robbed for my car by a man who put a gun to my head. My wife was with me. Robbery, killing, it is part of everyday life here. Gustavo's death is like dozens that happen every day, like thousands that happen every year.”

THE ROT

It has long been assumed that corruption is rampant in many of Guatemala's most important institutions. Still, many were shocked last February when three Salvadoran congressmen were waylaid on a road in Guatemala and slain. The killers turned out to be four Guatemalan police officers with links to organized crime. In fact, the congressmen were suspected of having organized-crime connections as well.

The officers quickly confessed and were sent to prison. But they had been there only four days when a group of heavily armed men wearing military garb and ski masks made its way through seven locked doors and, with no interference from prison guards, executed the men. Now, there is no way they can identify any co-conspirators.

Even by Guatemalan standards, the affair, which led to the resignation of both the minister responsible for the police and the chief of police, was outrageous. It unnerved many people and made them more anxious than ever for the UN-sanctioned commission to begin its investigations.

Human-rights activists hope that the commission will uncover the full extent of what it calls "illegal security organizations" — the death squads that are widely believed to be responsible for killing thousands of "undesirables," from gang members, homosexuals and transvestites to human-rights activists and the homeless.

Claudia Virginia Samayoa, director of the Centre for Human Rights, describes the state-approved killing of innocent civilians here as a modern-day massacre.

"It is simply a carryover from the massacres and slaughters that we witnessed during the war," she says. "There is a distinct pattern. One is, the victim is often tortured and often in a way that victims were tortured during the conflict. Secondly, the victim is often found in a different place than where they were killed, and finally their killer or killers usually administer the coup de grâce, a single shot to the head to ensure the person is dead.

"And it is all done with impunity. The officers are never brought to justice."

THE CHALLENGE

Angel de Leon, the prosecutor in charge of the Veliz shooting, is young and portly, with a big, mobile face and a bright smile. He is also better off than most prosecutors when it comes to murder cases.

A cellphone found on Mr. Barrios leads police to the robber's home, and a day after the shootout, Mr. de Leon takes Yomara, the dead man's widow, to the morgue to identify his body.

When she sees him, a tear starts to roll down her cheek, but she won't confirm that this is her husband. Mr. de Leon hears her whisper to an aunt who has accompanied her that if she does, she will have to come up with 1,800 quetzals (about \$250) to claim the body and she just doesn't have the money.

Later, when he visits her home, the prosecutor discovers just how poor the family is. The tiny ground-level apartment has dirt floors. Amid the squalor, her three young children walk around with few clothes on.

She tells him that her husband was 31 — an out-of-work carpenter who had been acting funny in recent days. He had been carrying around a piece of paper with a name on it, and the morning of the shooting left the house saying he was going to buy some lumber. He also left behind his identification, a common ploy of criminals in the event they are apprehended.

But she hastens to add that he was a good man and was never involved in a crime. Others who may have witnessed what Mr. Barrios did that morning refuse to come forward. Juan Garcia, the vendor who heard what he thought were firecrackers, might have seen, if not the whole thing, perhaps an accomplice fleeing the scene. But he fears reprisals, as does Yomara, who soon goes into hiding, telling the authorities that she is worried someone may try to silence her.

Even Maria Veliz wants things kept quiet — she also is afraid she might be killed. Meanwhile, the number of homicides assigned to Mr. de Leon grows by the day. In a 24-hour shift, which prosecutors work twice a week, they might get called to 20 crime scenes. He already has 45 active cases. Unless the Veliz shooting is solved soon, he admits, it is destined to be forgotten.

“What can you do?” he asks. “This is the way it is here. Unfortunately, killing is easy in Guatemala.”

THE CYNIC

Helen Mack looks for hope in her country's future, but can't find any. Guatemala's fiercest and most admired human-rights defender, she has a deeply rooted sense of despair. Her activism, in fact, sprang from the death of her sister, Myrna, at the hands of a government death squad.

Her quest for justice led to the groundbreaking conviction of a security official and, later, to the trial of two colonels and a general — the highest-ranking Guatemalans to face prosecution for human-rights violations. A colonel was convicted, but the ruling was overturned on appeal.

The 55-year-old daughter of Chinese-Guatemalan parents (her full surname is Mack Chang), she sees a judicial system, and a country, on the verge of collapse. She believes that Guatemalans could soon lose their democracy because excessive violence in a country often leads to authoritarian regimes.

She points to the elections in September, when former military strongman Otto Perez Molina narrowly lost to Mr. Colom. The Molina campaign symbol was a fist, supposedly to quash crime in Guatemala — but likely freedom and human rights as well, says Ms. Mack, sitting in her cramped office at the local branch of the Soros Foundation, which promotes democracy around the world.

She says the blueprint for a functioning democratic state can be found in the 1996 peace accord. The problem is that, since the accord was signed, there has not been a political leader strong enough to carry out the economic and social reforms necessary to truly transform the country.

For her, poverty is at the root of most of Guatemala's social ills. "It's the economic model that doesn't work," she says, pushing back her hair. "Any time a government has attempted to make fundamental changes to the economic model here, there has been a coup or a strike. People don't want to pay more taxes because they believe the government is already stealing the people's money and they don't want to give them more to steal."

But without money, the government can't fix the country's security problems, or its failing health-care system, or the education system. It is part of a vicious circle.

"This is why you have people robbing others on the bus and in their cars," Ms. Mack says. "This is why these robberies are part of everyday life now. Because there is no one with the political will to fix things. The rich are happy with the status quo. They aren't affected by the violence. It's the rest of the population, almost all of it, that is affected."

As a result, she adds, "I don't think there is any hope for Guatemala. The system is done for. People should be paying attention."

THE UPSHOT

This week, approaching two months after the shooting on 13th Street, Angel de Leon is no closer to discovering who else might have been involved. But with the passing of time, the case has taken an interesting turn.

Police now believe that Yomara Barrios, the grieving widow, knew more about what her late husband was up to that morning than she first let on — that her story about him being an out-of-work carpenter who had never been in trouble was a complete ruse.

The true nature of Mr. Barrios became clear when his sister, Sarai, finally claimed his body. She told police that he was a thief who once declared to her: "I'll be found dead one day and you'll have to put my body in a bag."

In fact, had she known how he died, Sarai said, she never would have paid the fee to retrieve his body from the morgue.

Later, at his funeral in Magdalena Milpas Altas, just west of the capital, those in attendance condemned Mr. Barrios for his criminal ways. Most said they felt that he was better off dead.

Based on the information provided by his sister, police began to take a closer look at what Mr. Barrios actually did for a living, and were told that he and his wife sold stolen jewellery.

“We think she knows more about those involved in the attempted carjacking,” Mr. de Leon says of Yomara. “But right now we have nothing.”

Police also received a tip that the driver of a car that sped away from the scene after the shooting wasn't alone. “So we now think there were two accomplices with Barrios that day,” Mr. de Leon explains.

But the trail has gone cold again. The name on the piece of paper Mr. Barrios carried with him has led nowhere “it's just too common in Guatemala to identify any one suspect.

And while the prosecutor believes that Yomara Barrios still knows more than she is letting on, he has no hard evidence to support his suspicions. Unless there is a break soon, he says, the investigation will be closed.

Fifteen fresh homicide cases have been added to the 45 that were on his desk at the time of the 13th Street shootout, and soon another 15 will land on top of those. Mr. de Leon looks at the files and shakes his head.

“In Guatemala, the killing never stops.”

[Gary Mason is a columnist and John Lehmann a staff photographer with The Globe and Mail's Vancouver bureau.]

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