

Rights Action
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Why Guatemalans Flee!

"What we're seeing in Guatemala is ... the way things have been there for a long time. If you are a civilian, there is one underlying reality: men with guns who do what they want and take what they want. Your options are to buy your own security and gunmen; to join a gang yourself; or to leave."

Mining And Men With Guns!

It is in these conditions that the global (mainly Canadian) mining industry is happily expanding, contributing to and benefitting from the very exploitation, violence and impunity that so many have to flee from.

Guatemalans Aren't Just Fleeing Gangs: The Media Narrative Misses What Life There Is Really Like

By [Saul Elbein](#)

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118675/child-migrants-guatemala-are-fleeing-more-just-gang-violence>

As Central Americans have begun streaming across our border seeking asylum, I've followed press accounts with an increasing sense of queasiness. There are, in the opinion pieces, two main schools: that the immigrants are fleeing horrible gang violence, and should be allowed to stay; or that they're economic migrants manipulating our asylum system and should be made to leave.

To Americans used to arguing about Mexican immigrants and talking about the Mexican drug war, these are easy frames for us to fall into. But Guatemala is not Mexico, and in that implied contradiction I see a lack of understanding of what life in that part of Central America is actually like, and has been like for a long time.

In February 2013, I was in Guatemala City doing a [story](#) for this magazine on the gangland murders of Guatemala City bus drivers. The driver we were following was getting his bus repaired in Zone 6, an asphalt and concrete neighborhood which would look familiar to anyone who's spent time in the grittier parts of Houston or Los Angeles. The neighborhood was largely what Guatemalans call a "red zone," or a "hot zone"—gang controlled, a patchwork of territories divided between different bands of the MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang.

Right by the mechanic was the National Police Academy. Which meant there were dozens of black-clad Policia Nacionales walking back and forth, many of them carrying automatic weapons. It should have been the safest place in the city; a protective umbrella over the surrounding neighborhood.

But across the street from the station was a scene that gave lie to that protection. There was a little convenience store—the kind of place that sold beer and gum and phone cards—and in front of the station stood a solitary armed guard, holding a pump-action shotgun, watching the police go by.

That lone guard explains something powerful about the way that Guatemala works, and what those migrants are fleeing—a world in which you can only achieve safety through force; and you can't count on the government for anything.

It is sometimes hard for Americans to see Guatemalan political realities because there are, in essence, two Guatemalas. The first Guatemala is a tiny state much like our own: a democratic federal republic with defined borders; a capital city; a president and congress; government ministries. There is a constitution and the promise of rule of law. There is a government which has roads and holds elections. There is a national army and police force.

It looks, in other words, a lot like a failed state. This Guatemala, the governmental Guatemala, has no control over, by some counts, half of its territory. There is near total impunity for murder.

But that Guatemala is in many ways a veneer, gilding a much older, feudal reality underneath. The best analogy for this second Guatemala—sometimes called the “deep state”—is the world of the HBO drama *Game of Thrones*, a place of feudal relationships and family intrigues dominated by violence. A small handful of families control the vast majority of land, wealth, and power, dividing major monopolies between them. The Castillo family, for example, owns Cerveceria Centro America, the main beer; the Gutierrez family owns Pollo Campero, the national KFC knockoff. There are cement families, ranching families. And then in the shadows are the new-money upstarts: like the [Leones](#) and [Mendozas](#), active in drug trafficking.

This Guatemala is not a failed state, in that it protects the interests of old families and the people who run it.

Inequality has driven misery and violence in countries across the hemisphere. In other Latin American countries—notably Mexico—there were violent revolutions which, for better or worse, broke the power of the oligarchy and created a functional state and a rule of law, even if a corrupt one.

In Guatemala, that revolution was stillborn. A democratizing movement in the 1940s tried to institute land reform and rein in the oligarchy and U.S. corporations like United Fruit—until after ten years it was crushed by a CIA-backed counter-revolution. The outrage at the counterrevolution drove a Marxist rebellion, and for the next 30 years the Guatemalan Army rampaged throughout the highlands under the auspices of fighting guerrillas.

But often the guerrillas were only the excuse for old-school wars of conquest. That was what happened in the early 1980s in [Rio Negro](#), where the army attacked a village that had refused to make way for a new hydroelectric project, raping and murdering [all but one](#) of the inhabitants. Around the same time, in the Ixil Triangle in the western highlands, the (mostly mestizo) army ran a war of genocide against the indigenous Maya. Most estimates say that around 200,000 people were murdered or disappeared during the war.

These people were murdered, by the Guatemalan state, often with medieval savagery. In the highlands, communities were often forced by the Army to hunt for “subversives,” sometimes to hack their own neighbors to death.

This was a war that happened in living memory; the peace accords were signed in only 1996. After the war, Guatemala put on the trappings of a democratic government. The army returned to the barracks.

But there was no accounting, and none of the structural things that had driven the conflict changed. Few soldiers were punished for what they had done in the war, and many were decorated—like the current president, Otto Perez Molina, who in the 1980s participated in the [scorched earth campaigns](#) against the Ixil Maya. In his 2012 campaign for president, he was [supported by most of the feudal families](#), who still had a stranglehold of most of the land, wealth, and power in the country.

The only model of power that exists in Guatemala is, in other words, terroristic, extra-legal, and dominated by violence. So is it any surprise that after the war, on the streets—where people grasped for the scraps that were left, where children grew up with no chance at wealth and less at respect—pirate organizations like the MS-13 grew?

What we're seeing in Guatemala is not quite, in other words, a crime wave. It's simply the way things have been there for a long time, pushed to the next level. If you are a civilian there, beneath the labels—soldier; gangster; policeman; army; cartel—is but one underlying reality: men with guns who do what they want and take what they want. Your options are to buy your own security and gunmen; to join a gang yourself; or to leave.

And so many leave. They leave for the reasons that most of our ancestors came to America, of course—the ones who left places like Italy and Ireland and Russia and China. They came for a better life, and part of “better life” meant not having to live someplace where everything belonged to the aristocracy, and where their bodies were at constant risk from violent men. Those things, in a society like Guatemala, are intimately intertwined. It is a sign of how blessed we are that, living in a country where “security” and “economy” and “politics” all come in separate boxes, we have a hard time seeing that.

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Say No To “Business As Usual” In Guatemala and Honduras

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies and investors (including public pension funds like Social Security and the Canada Pension Plan) maintain profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan and Honduran elites, turning a blind eye to repression, violence and impunity that are the norm in both countries.

Send, and keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (MPs, Congresspersons, Senators), to your media, and to your own pension and investment funds, asking why our governments, companies and investment firms do nothing about repression and violence, and environmental and health harms associated with North American businesses, while benefiting from these economic relations with the Guatemalan and Honduran political, military and economic elites.

Rights Action

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