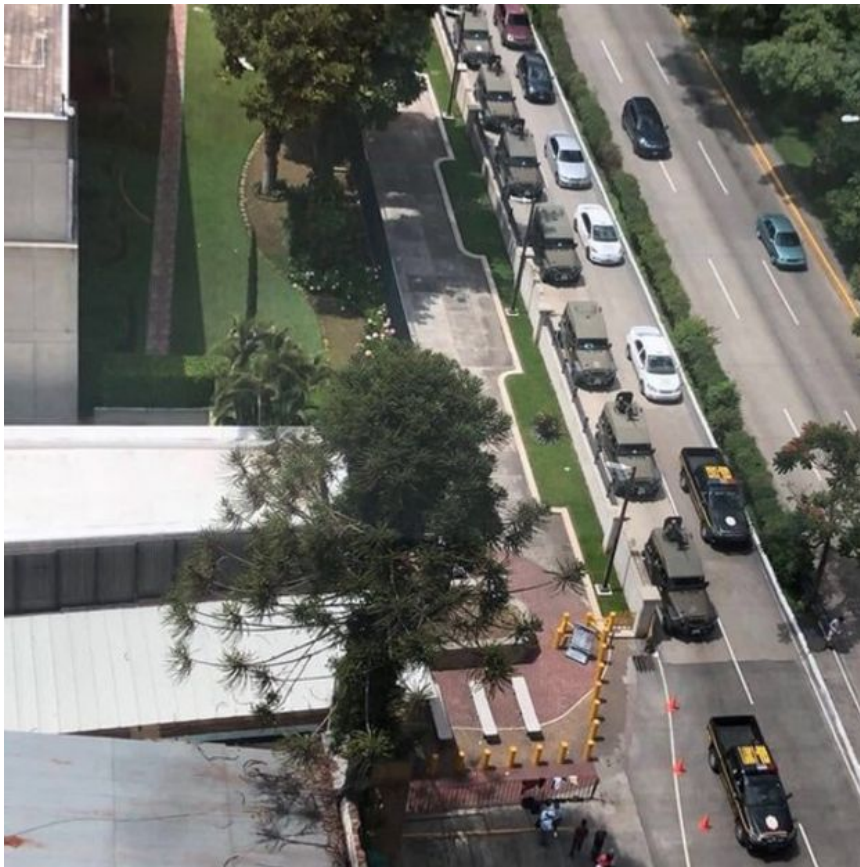


## Without CICIG, land and human rights defenders face deadly persecution in Guatemala

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/without-cicig-land-and-human-rights-defenders-face-deadly-persecution-in-guatemala>

*“Successive governments have pursued a development model so exclusionary that [poverty rates](#) have risen, child malnutrition is among the highest in the world, and more than 75 percent of the [indigenous population lives in poverty](#). The elite seem willing to enrich themselves and block reform at any cost.”*

This is the “development model” pursued by the U.S. and Canadian governments, our resource extraction and food-for-export companies, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank,  
...



(Guatemalan military illegally surrounding CICIG offices in Guatemala City, September 1, 2018)

### Support needed for land and human rights defenders in Guatemala and Honduras

- **Matching donor:** for donations (up to total of \$20,000) made by September 24, 2018.
- **To donate:** see below

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## Without a U.N.-backed commission, land rights activists face more deadly persecution in Guatemala

By Rony Morales and Michael Taylor, Washington Post, September 10, 2018

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/09/10/without-a-u-n-backed-commission-land-rights-activists-face-more-deadly-persecution-in-guatemala/?utm\\_term=.867116168b74](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/09/10/without-a-u-n-backed-commission-land-rights-activists-face-more-deadly-persecution-in-guatemala/?utm_term=.867116168b74)

A crucial institution in the fight to protect human rights and the rule of law is in serious jeopardy in Guatemala. [At the order of President Jimmy Morales](#), the independent International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (known as CICIG for its initials in Spanish) won't have a new term, 12 years after the United Nations established it.

Ivan Velásquez, the head of the CICIG, withstood an attempt by the president to expel him last year. But the Colombian national [is now barred from entering Guatemala](#). Legal appeals have been filed with the Constitutional Court seeking to overturn the order.

Velásquez remains stoically committed to the work of the commission, [remaining in charge](#) from abroad. We met him a few weeks ago when he received our high-level delegation, organized by the International Land Coalition in response to an outbreak of violence against land rights defenders in Guatemala.

The past eight months have [seen a wave of assaults, death threats and assassinations](#). Nineteen activists and journalists have been murdered; many of them were also tortured. Two were community journalists, three were trade union organizers, and 14 were indigenous leaders.

No one has been charged so far, despite the fact that many of the assassinations happened in public places.

In our meeting, Velásquez expressed deep concern over the growing influence of “criminal structures” on the state, the militarization of the police and legislation to restrict civil liberties. He explained the increase in killings as a desperate effort to contain grass-roots movements for democracy and indigenous land rights.

One such movement is the Peasants Development Committee (CODECA). [Publicly lambasted by the president](#), CODECA has seen [six of its leaders](#) assassinated since January.

The majority of activists have been killed while defending land rights. Guatemala is not unique in this respect. Two-thirds of the 312 activists killed around the world in 2017, [according to a Front Line Defenders' report](#), were defending the rights of people and communities under threat from mega projects, mining and big business.

It's horrifyingly normal for rich landowners in Guatemala to force whole communities from land on which they've lived for generations, often with the help of private militias or the army.

Guatemala's [rivers have been handed over wholesale to private investors](#) for hydroelectric generation and irrigation of vast sugar-cane and palm-oil plantations.

What we witness today comes on the back of a long history of dispossession of the indigenous majority. By 1950, 72 percent of Guatemala's land was [concentrated](#) in the hands of a mere 2 percent of the population. The efforts by a short-lived democratic government to implement land reform was cut [short by the U.S.-backed coup in 1954](#). The 36-year civil war that followed pitted indigenous and peasant communities against the government. When the [peace accords were finally signed in 1996](#), land reform was a central element.

Yet successive governments since then have ignored the issue. They have instead pursued a development model so exclusionary that while Guatemala's gross domestic product [has doubled](#) over the past decade, [poverty rates](#) over the same period have actually risen. Child malnutrition is among the highest in the world, [at 46.5 percent](#), and more than 75 percent of the [indigenous population lives in poverty](#).

The elite seem willing to continue enriching themselves and blocking reform at any cost. Now, it seems, that cost may be the risk of sliding back to the dark days of the civil war.

One of the few institutions capable of challenging the status quo was the CICIG. Velásquez did not shy from doing so: [He indicted the former president and vice president on corruption charges](#). Now communities fighting for their land and the environment have lost one of their last hopes for protection. The relentless misery caused by dispossession further destabilizes prospects for peace not only in Guatemala, but also in an already volatile region. It also drives families with few other options at home to attempt the perilous journey to the United States. If only for this reason, the United States should care about land reform in Guatemala.

Yet, the United States so far shows no sign of using its significant economic or political leverage. It remains Guatemala's most important trading partner, including in the land-hungry sectors of hydropower and agriculture. The United States inexplicably refused to back the joint [statement issued last week by the G13 donors group](#) in support of Velásquez and the vital work of the CICIG.

Guatemala can't keep ignoring corruption and the land rights of its citizens. Agrarian reform — or redistribution of agricultural land — is a 21st century issue at the top of the political agenda not just in Guatemala, but in countries such as South Africa, Colombia and Indonesia.

It is in the international community's interests to ensure that the polarization in Guatemala does not reach a breaking point. Only by restoring the mandate of independent institutions such as the CICIG and empowering and protecting activists calling for land reform can all in Guatemala have a fairer chance to make a decent living, and only then can peace finally flourish.

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**Matching donor:** for donations (up to total of \$20,000) made by September 24, 2018.

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### **Rights Action September 2018 newsletter**

- “What’s going on? It is probably linked to the unjust global economy, in the unjust nation state system”, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/whats-going-on-september-2018-newsletter>

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