

## Who Killed Jakelin Caal Maquín?

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## Who Killed Jakelin Caal Maquín at the US Border?

She died of cardiac arrest, but the real killer was decades of US policy in support of Guatemalan regimes that have displaced and slaughtered the Maya population.

By [Greg Grandin](#) and [Elizabeth Oglesby](#), The Nation, Dec. 17, 2018

<https://www.thenation.com/article/guatemala-refugee-crisis-jakelin-caal-maquin/>



A picture of Jakelin Caal Maquín, a 7-year-old girl who died in US Customs and Border Protection custody, at a protest in El Paso, Texas, December 16, 2018. (Reuters / Jose Luis Gonzalez)

Her full name was Jakelin Amei Rosmery Caal Maquín, and she was from Guatemala. She turned 7 days before her [death](#) on December 8 from septic shock and cardiac arrest in the custody of the US Border Patrol. As public outrage mounts over reports of negligence on the part of the Border Patrol in [delaying medical care](#) for the child, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen [blamed](#) Jakelin's family for their choice to "cross illegally."

Jakelin was Q'eqchi'-Maya, from the Guatemalan town of Raxruhá, in northern Alta Verapaz. Here, as in much of rural Guatemala, Maya communities have struggled for over a century to remain on their lands. For much of that time, US governments intervened on the wrong side of those struggles. The result was a vortex of violent displacement that continues to this day.

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(Rights Action December 2018 newsletter) <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/refugee-producing-international-community>

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At the beginning of the 1900s, Q'eqchi'-Mayas lived mostly in Guatemala's lush, fertile northern highlands. But during the 20th century, many were pushed out. First, coffee planters, who were members of Guatemala's colonial and military elite, as well as new European and North American investors, dispossessed them of their lands through violence and legal chicanery. When Q'eqchi' villagers tried to fight back, they were killed or exiled.

The CIA-orchestrated 1954 [coup](#) against a democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, was a turning point in the Q'eqchi' region. An ambitious land reform, which had [widespread beneficial effects](#) in Alta Verapaz, was reversed, and poor Q'eqchi's began a great migration—fleeing political repression and hunger—to the lowlands, either east toward the Caribbean or north into the Petén rainforest. Raxruhá, Jakelin's home town, was founded in the 1970s by these internal migrants.

Caal and Maquín are common surnames among the Q'eqchi', with strong historical resonance. [Adelina Caal Maquin](#), also known as Mama Maquín, is an icon of political struggle in Guatemala. Like Jakelin, Adelina was a refugee, having fled her mountain village after the 1954 coup for the lowland town of Panzós, where she became a leader in the fight against land evictions.

On May 29, 1978, she was murdered along with scores of other protesters. The Panzós Massacre kicked off a brutal period of violence: over the next few years, the [US-backed Guatemalan military](#) murdered over 100,000 Mayas. The military especially targeted Q'eqchi' communities for massacres, and then rounded up the survivors into military-controlled model villages. A women's refugee organization honored Mama Maquín by adopting her name for its organization.

The end of the Cold War in the 1990s brought no peace to the Q'eqchi'. Policies pushed by Washington brought new afflictions: The promotion of mining, African palm plantations for "clean" biofuels, hydroelectric production, and hardwood timbering destroyed their subsistence economy and poisoned their water and corn land.

Meanwhile, Q'eqchi' communities were caught in the crosshairs of an escalating international drug war. As Washington spent [billions of dollars](#) shutting down South American trafficking routes, Q'eqchi' communities were turned into a transshipment corridor for cocaine moving into the United States. Throughout the 2010s, drug-related crime and violence that had previously been concentrated in Colombia [engulfed](#) Central America, including [Jakelin's birthplace](#), accelerating migration north. In 2010, narcotics-related violence grew so bad, with the Mexican Zetas cartel effectively controlling large parts of Alta Verapaz, that the government placed the department under an extended state of siege.

Q'eqchi' men and women fought back, organizing social movements to defend their communities. But the repression continued. In 2011, soldiers working with private paramilitary forces [evicted](#) hundreds of Q'eqchi' families, turning their land over to an agribusiness [financed](#) by international development loans. One study [estimates](#) that between 2003 and 2012, 11 percent of Q'eqchi' families lost their land

to sugar and African palm plantations. By 2018, the situation was even more dire, with a [wave](#) of murders of Q'eqchi' peasant activists.

And, so, growing numbers of Q'eqchi' refugees are forced to leave communities founded by their parents and grandparents, taking their chances on migration to the United States. Why would a father bring his young daughter on a perilous trek to reach the United States?

CNN Español [interviewed](#) Jakelin's relatives in her hometown in Guatemala, who said that her father, Nery Gilberto Caal, 29, did all he could to "stay in his land, but necessity made him try to get to the US." According to the World Bank, the Q'eqchi' are among the poorest of the poor in Guatemala, suffering from chronic malnutrition.

The past two decades brought changes in US border policy, with dire consequences for Central Americans. The militarization of the border since the 1990s, especially the sealing off of urban entry points, has pushed migrants to cross in remote and treacherous desert areas, where thousands have died. Border militarization also helps explain why people would bring their children on such a dangerous trek. In the past, men usually migrated alone. They would work for a while in the United States and then return to visit their families. But now, border militarization has ratcheted up the cost of making the journey. Where it used to cost around \$1,000 to make the journey from Central America, it now costs up to \$12,000, making shuttle migration impossible. The only way for families to stay together is for women and children to migrate. Yes, it's dangerous, but so is staying in Guatemala.

Jakelin and her father were among a group of 163 Guatemalans who turned themselves in to the Border Patrol at a remote entry point in the New Mexico desert on the night of December 6, intending to request political asylum upon entering the United States. This is legal. No matter how or where people enter the country, US law says they may make an [affirmative claim for asylum](#). Of course, it's far safer to make an asylum claim at a well-trafficked border entry point, rather than a remote one in the middle of the night. But we've all seen the brutal displays of how the Trump administration has blocked asylum petitioners at the US border, from [shutting down bridges](#), to stringing [razor wire](#), to [tear-gassing](#) children.

Jakelin's death puts into harrowing relief the brutal consequences of Trump's crackdown on border crossers, and the [inhumane conditions](#) of immigrant detention. But the story of how this 7-year-old girl ended up dead has deeper roots in the patterns of US-backed violent displacement in Guatemala, as well as in decades of border militarization. If it takes a village to raise a child, sometimes it takes a nation to kill one.

(Greg Grandin teaches history at New York University and is the author, most recently, of [Kissinger's Shadow](#). His new book, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall*, will be published in March 2019. Elizabeth Oglesby is associate professor of Latin American studies and geography at the University of Arizona. She is co-editor, with Greg Grandin, of *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics*.)

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NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org)

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