

## **“We will never be silent”**

**Two Guatemalan indigenous women, victims of rapes committed by U.S.-backed regimes, receive human rights award in Washington DC**

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/we-will-never-be-silent>

- **Below:** Prensa Comunitaria article by Hector Silva, translated by Rights Action

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### **"We will never be silent"**

**Chronicle of a night when Washington listened to two Mayan women who survived horror**

By Hector Silva, Prensa Comunitaria, September 23, 2022

<https://www.prensacomunitaria.org/2022/09/no-nos-vamos-a-callar-nunca-cronica-de-la-noche-en-que-washington-escucho-a-dos-mujeres-mayas-que-sobrevivieron-al-horror/>

The Mayan women received their awards in front of half a dozen President Biden administration officials, which is increasingly tolerant of Central American governments that, like that of Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala, have plunged the region back into an authoritarian drift similar to that which provoked the internal conflicts of the past.

The voices of Demecia Yat, a Mayan Q'eqchi' woman from Sepur Zarco, and Máxima Emiliana García Yat, a Mayan Achí woman from Rabinal, were not only theirs on Wednesday, September 21, the day they received the Human Rights Award from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in the U.S. capital.

Countless Mayan women whose bodies were raped by agents of the Guatemalan State, their supporters and accomplices, also spoke with their voices. They were the voice of survivors who have found the courage to bring their aggressors to justice.

Li xkawil xch'ooleb' wiib' chi ixq. This is how it is written, in Q'eqchi, "the courage of two women".

That, in essence, is what Wednesday's ceremony in Washington was all about: the courage of Demecia Yat and Máxima García.

And from that emerged the main narrative of the night: Central America is a place that is returning to its most violent past, one in which the voices of victims and dissenters can only survive through struggle and courage.

After 9 p.m., Demecia and Máxima took to the main stage of the large hall where WOLA held its annual gala to present the 2022 awards. Maria Otero, a Bolivian-born woman who served as Deputy Secretary of State in the Barack Obama administration, presented them with the awards, two paintings of a colorful condor, WOLA's emblem. U.S. and Latin American officials, activists, journalists, diplomats and the public in the audience were finishing dinner; the after-dinner chatter had not yet died down.

Then Doña Demecia spoke. In Q'eqchi'.

She summarized her story, one marked by a pain that never heals, but which Demecia has tamed over time. The pain is always there. In the few minutes that protocol allowed, she told those listening in suits and ties and long evening dresses about the courage it takes to stand up after repeated sexual violations at the hands of paramilitaries to confront the most powerful men in her country, those who protected her aggressors, to look them in the face and demand justice, not revenge, as the woman had said before the award ceremony, but because that path, that of seeking redress, is the only one that allows one to survive with dignity.

In 2016, Demecia and 14 other Q'eqchi' women succeeded in having the Guatemalan justice system convict military officers who had subjected them to sexual slavery in Sepur Zarco, Izabal, in the 1980s.

Demecia was crying when she finished speaking. There were a few seconds of silence, but it was no less overwhelming for its brevity. Then came a standing ovation. Standing, the audience saluted the Q'eqchi' Maya woman.



Photo: Héctor Silva.

Earlier Máxima García Valey had spoken. She is one of five Mayan Achí women who, this year, won the conviction of five paramilitaries accused of sexual torture in Rabinal, Alta Verapaz, also during the years of the internal conflict. Máxima was brief. She approached the podium to thank them for the invitation and the support for her struggle, which is that of many women like her, she said.

It was not that Máxima had no words to tell of what had been done to her and her search for justice. It is that they had come before, profuse, when at lunch with executives of the organization that awarded her, she told, stoic, her story. In the evening, she reiterated, smiling, her thanks and pronounced the words that sum up the strength that has driven her since she decided to seek justice, after discarding the initial fear and shame caused by the rape: "They will never silence us," she exclaimed before saying goodbye and leaving the stage.

### **Central America at the U.S. table**

The Guatemalan women received the award alongside David Morales, a Salvadoran lawyer representing the victims of El Mozote, a village in northeastern El Salvador where in 1981 the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite force of the Salvadoran Armed Forces trained and funded by Ronald Reagan's United States, massacred 978 people, mostly children under the age of 12.

At noon on Wednesday, before the awards gala, Morales and the Guatemalan women shared their stories with WOLA executives. There, Doña Máxima recounted the horror in detail.

The images come through, concise, from Maxima's account. Soldiers and paramilitaries nearly killed her twice. The aggressors first came to her house, in the village of Chichupac de Rabinal, in November 1981. They raped her mother, who was pregnant at the time, and then killed her.

They raped her and the baby she was carrying. The military left Maxima's mother "hanging" from a beam. Three months later, in January 1982, the assassins arrived again. This time to rape Maxima, who was also pregnant.

"I had my child... A boy... He died a little later. After that I was ruined, I didn't stop bleeding for three years". Maxima's story in Washington is framed by an infinite silence, which only she herself is able to break with more words. The rapes, she says, were systematic, as they were for years during the governments of Fernando Lucas Garca and Efran Ros Montt.

Demecia confirms this when talking about what happened in Sepur Zarco. "When the violence happened I think most of the women were victims... Some were afraid and ashamed; they said it was a sin to talk about what they had done to us... But we broke the silence."

Maxima and Demecia had to walk the tortuous path that victims who, like them, first challenged themselves and then confronted those who raped them, have been forced to walk.

Maxima tells it: "We came out of all the fear and shame. When we started this journey we didn't even speak Spanish. Once we overcame the fear, a door opened..."

The story of Maxima Garca and the Achi Women became a judicial process, but the formal complaint against the former civil defense patrol members was only the beginning of the struggle for justice and disclosure. A judge, Claudette Domnguez, tried to dismiss the case. The women sued her for racism. Dominguez was removed from the process, which was taken over by Judge Miguel Angel Galvez. On January 24, 2022, the men were sentenced.

But, in Guatemala, the ignominy did not stop. Glvez, the judge who rescued the case of the Ach women from oblivion, the State and the forces related to the military of the past, among them the Foundation against Terrorism directed by Ricardo Mendez Ruiz, persecute him mercilessly, and have threatened to imprison him or send him into exile.

At the luncheon in Washington where Demecia and Maxima told their stories, it was David Morales, the Salvadoran lawyer, who highlighted the return of Guatemala and El Salvador to scenarios of authoritarianism reminiscent of those days of the 1980s, so far among the darkest in Central American history.

The struggles of the Mayan women, said Morales, reminds him of that of Rufina Amaya, one of the survivors of the El Mozote massacre, whose testimony was seminal in bringing the massacre to court.

Like Máxima and Demecia, in El Salvador Rufina, who died in 2007, spent years fighting to tell the truth about the massacre and to achieve justice, but she died before the barriers imposed by the Salvadoran judiciary came down. Today, a court of first instance keeps open a file on those crimes, but the case languishes after the Supreme Court of Justice, controlled by President Nayib Bukele, dismissed the judge who had moved the process forward, as happened to Gálvez in the case of the Achí women in Guatemala.

"This year's awards are a warning of what is happening now in Central America. It allows us to remember that what generated these abuses in the past is gaining strength again, the accumulation of power, destroying those who think differently," reflected Morales.

Carolina Jiménez Sandoval, the president of WOLA, agrees that democracy has suffered setbacks throughout the region. "What we are witnessing is the advance and consolidation of authoritarianism in several countries and threats from extremists here in the United States. That is why on this occasion we decided to pay special attention to Central America," she said during the awards ceremony.

Máxima García, Demecia Yat, David Morales and Carolina Jiménez delivered their remarks in the ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, September 21. Among those listening were Todd Robinson, State Department counter-narcotics secretary and former ambassador to Guatemala, representatives of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), two Democratic congressmen and several legislative aides. All applauded the Mayan women's testimonies with a standing ovation.

The emotion of the officials, however, does not seem, these days, to be a guarantee of relevant actions by the Biden administration in the face of the Central American debacle.

Robinson himself, along with other senior Biden officials in charge of Latin America, such as Juan Gonzalez, White House national security advisor, have been rather tepid in condemning or acting against the authoritarian excesses of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador or Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala.

Also in the audience were two former judges, a former attorney general, a former anti-mafia prosecutor and a journalist, all Guatemalans, all exiled to Washington because of the onslaught of Giammattei and his power group against attempts to remove the justice system from the dynamics of corruption and racism faced, for example, by Mayan women.

These exiles, condemned at the time by U.S. officials, have not translated into more decisive actions to pressure the Guatemalan government, which continues to persecute former anti-mafia prosecutors, especially women, and critical journalists.

More of the same in the case of Nayib Bukele's El Salvador, whom David Morales denounced at the WOLA gala for destroying Salvadoran democracy and accelerating the country's race to the precipice of authoritarianism.

It took Demecia Yat and Máxima García 40 years to find justice and some redress. Four decades of pain, of new humiliations before a justice system that has always been racist, but that found some glimpses of light through which the convictions of the military and patrolmen who violated the bodies of these women slipped through.

These windows are beginning to close in Central America. In the face of the impending darkness, Máxima's words sound like an obligation: "They will never silence us".

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