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GUATEMALA

Campesinos Demand Solutions

Indigenous groups, labor unions and social organizations unified their demands in early Apr into a movement they named the National Maya and Popular Uprising.

The goal of this movement is to force the government to resolve a list of demands related primarily to land conflicts and indigenous rights—resolution of land conflicts, pardon of the payments for land given to them by the state, suspension of mining concessions and approval of a Nationality Law for Indigenous Peoples. Movement leaders say these concerns have been ignored due to a lack of political will to address the plight of campesinos.

Thousands marched in mostly peaceful protests in Guatemala City and throughout the country on 20 Apr to draw attention to their grievances. Members of a teachers' union joined the protests, asking for pay raises and the suspension of a reform that it fears will lead to the privatization of education.

After negotiating for more than seven hours on the day of the protests, Vice President Eduardo Stein and *campesino* and union leaders announced in a press conference that they would begin talks to address the demands. Stein also agreed to establish a working group to look for solutions to the land conflicts.

Earlier in Apr, Juan Tiney, a leader of the National Indigenous and Campesino Coordination (CONIC), called on indigenous government workers to resign, explaining that it was time to know if “they are on the side of the people or the business owners.”

Indigenous government employees responded by meeting on 18 Apr to discuss their position and by requesting an audience with President Óscar Berger. “We feel an obligation to our people, and many of us reached our positions through their support, which is why we are in a difficult situation,” explained Rosalina Tuyuc of the National Reparations Commission.

Édgar Ajcip, director of the National Peace Fund, affirmed that “the possibility of resigning is not foreseen until dialogue is exhausted.”

Femicide in the International Eye

In a move that pleased civil society organizations seeking international support for the fight against femicide—murder of women—the Guatemalan Minister of Women’s Issues presented a report on femicide in Guatemala and Mexico during a 19 Apr public hearing in the European Parliament.

Joining Minister Gabriela Nuñez at the hearing were other representatives from Guatemala, the coordinator of the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, and the chair of the Special Commission of the Mexican Parliament. The hearing was organized by the European Parliament’s Sub-Commission on Human Rights and the Commission for Women’s Rights and Gender Equity.

While precisely what constitutes femicide is the subject of debate, it is widely considered to be “gender violence—violence directed against a person specifically because she is female,” as defined by Kent Patterson in an International Relations Center (IRC) report.

According to the Center for Guatemalan Studies, the murder rate of women in Guatemala is the second highest in the world, outpaced only by Russia. More than 2,400 women were murdered in Guatemala between ’00 and ’05, and the yearly total has only grown: 300 women were murdered in ’03, 527 in ’04 and 624 in ’05. During the first two-and-a-half months of ’06, 206 women were murdered.

Most of the female murder victims in Guatemala are young and poor. Their bodies nearly always show signs of torture and sexual aggression.

An ’05 Amnesty International report noted that “foot-dragging, poorly protected evidence scenes, ignoring concrete leads, and failing to gather forensic evidence” (IRC) characterize police investigations of women’s murders in Guatemala. For the more than 2,600 murders during the last six years, there have been a miniscule 15 convictions.

Studies of femicide in Guatemala trace its roots to the 36-year civil war that ended in ’96. A report by the Roman Catholic Church concluded that “rape and sexual violence were an integral part of the counterinsurgency strategy” used by government soldiers and pro-government paramilitary groups.

Family Planning Law Published Amid Controversy

On 27 Apr, the daily congressional record published a law intended to improve family planning services, following the Constitutional Court’s 5 Apr ruling that President Berger’s veto of the law was not valid. Laws do not go into effect until published in the congressional record.

Congress had approved the family planning law in Nov ’05, but Berger vetoed it in Dec under pressure from Roman Catholic and Evangelical church leaders.

The law, which was championed by women’s organizations, insures access to family planning services, as well as information and counseling on sexual and reproductive health. The law’s intent is to make information about family planning methods available to all Guatemalan women, to avoid unwanted pregnancies, and to reduce maternal mortality.

The Coordination for Political Actions Favoring Women's Health and Development is planning an informational campaign about the law. One of the campaign's most important audiences will be indigenous women—the group that has the highest rate of maternal mortality and unsatisfied demand for contraceptives.

Representatives of Catholic and Evangelical churches were angered by the law, taking particular issue with its mandate to teach sex education in schools.

“The law is a crime against life and the inalienable right of parents to guide their children based on the Holy Bible,” said Raúl Hernández Chacón, secretary of the Education Commission of the Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church in Guatemala.

Chacón explained that sex education in Catholic schools is imparted through conferences with parents, who are expected to transmit the information to their children. In public schools, sex education—taught directly to students—is already part of the curriculum.

Marco Antonio Rodríguez, secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Guatemala, agreed that parents should be the ones to teach their children about sexual matters: “The law is a crime against morality and biblical principles, since it promotes sexual promiscuity and indiscriminate use of contraceptives.”

The Roman Catholic Church announced that its lawyers are looking into ways to challenge the law in the Constitutional Court.

Myrna Montenegro of the Women's Coordination says that negative reactions to the law are based in part on incorrect information. “There is a lot of confusion. They are saying that contraceptives will be distributed in schools, when the law doesn't say that anywhere. It only tries to make sure that young people have information about sexuality and how to avoid unwanted pregnancies.”

Tension in Congress Over DR-CAFTA

Despite threats from President Berger to withdraw from the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) after the US sent yet another list of “humiliating” demands for changes to Guatemalan laws, Congress approved the modifications to the laws on 19 Apr, in the first of three required debates.

Modifying Guatemalan laws is an expected part of the process of implementing DR-CAFTA. While Guatemala ratified the trade agreement in Mar '05, it cannot go into effect until the nation's legal code is changed to align with DR-CAFTA's terms—specifically in areas such as telecommunications, intellectual property, authors' rights, income tax, and the penal code.

What is upsetting members of Congress, however, is the number of times that the US has asked for more changes to the Guatemalan legal code. At least once a month since Jan '06, the US government has sent Guatemala new requests for changes.

Just a week after the 19 Apr approval of the modifications in first debate, the US government solicited still more changes to Guatemalan laws. While Vice Minister of Economy Enrique Lacs explained that the requests were related to form, not content, congressional representatives showed signs of impatience.

“It’s not possible that [the US government is] sending us more changes and that, what’s more, they’re in English. Out of respect to our representatives’ intelligence, we should know the changes thoroughly. We can’t raise our hands without knowing what for,” opined Aristides Crespo, party leader of the Guatemalan Republican Front.

Vice President Eduardo Stein challenged the idea that the US had only requested form-related changes, charging that Guatemala’s northern neighbor had pushed for alterations favoring its pharmaceutical companies that were not part of the original agreement.

—*Emily Heinlein*