

# Fleeing, Not Migrating: Crisis in Central America

**LCR**

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BOSTON**

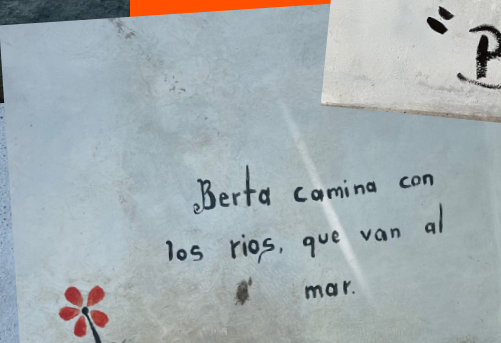


Celebrating 25  
Years  
of Fighting for Social and  
Environmental Justice!  
**GreenRoots**



**ALIANZA  
AMERICAS**





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## Cover Image

Mural in Utopia, the COPINH compound in La Esperanza, Honduras.



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# Introduction and Executive Summary

In August 2022, Centro Presente (CP), Alianza Americas (AA), GreenRoots (GR), and Lawyers for Civil Rights (LCR) conducted a week-long fact-finding mission in Central America. The delegation — including elected Massachusetts officials — met with community leaders, human rights and environmental justice advocates, academics, researchers, legal scholars, and journalists in Honduras and Guatemala.

The mission's objective was to observe, document and analyze the country conditions that Hondurans and Guatemalans encounter, particularly the root causes of forced internal displacement and migration to the United States. This report specifically examines the political, economic, and social conditions in Honduras and Guatemala through an intersectional lens to better understand the context and nuance of migration, sovereignty of land and natural resources, and the erosion of the rule of law and democracy across Central America.

The forced migration of large numbers of Central Americans, which originated in the 1980s, was largely the result of political conflicts in which the United States supported predatory oligarchies, military coups, and dictators obsessed with keeping in place feudal forms of economic and political oppression. Corporate interests have also been inextricably linked to the long history of interventions in countries like Honduras and Guatemala.

This history has a direct connection to Massachusetts, where the global headquarters for the United Fruit Company, a key player in the extractive nature of corporate abuse, was located. Migration by Central American nationals to Massachusetts should not be surprising, considering the historical ties that have connected Honduras and Guatemala to New England.



Our findings indicate that migration from Central America is driven by a toxic and fatal combination of violence, political persecution, extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and most recently, the devastating effects of environmental degradation, the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. All of which is compounded by the complicated history of the United States' involvement in the region and its implications on current conditions. Hondurans and Guatemalans are forcibly displaced from their homes despite the imminent harm and danger inherent in migration. Given that Honduran and Guatemalan immigrants represent two of the largest Latinx populations in the United States,<sup>1</sup> this report is designed to inform policymakers, advocates, and attorneys about the current conditions in Guatemala, Honduras, and the region so that we can all better serve the immigrant community.

# Methodology

The delegation utilized a qualitative evaluation method, including site visits with key stakeholders described in more detail below, as well as in-depth interviews with organizational leaders and advocates. This report contains the delegation's key findings.

## Honduras

From August 15, 2022, through August 17, 2022, the delegation met with the following organizations in Honduras:

- **Grupo Sociedad Civil (GSC)**, a non-governmental organization that represents a coalition of groups from various sectors addressing sexual and gender-based violence, forced displacement, and migration.<sup>2</sup>
- **Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH)**, a research institute focused on the defense and promotion of human rights and democracy in Honduras.<sup>3</sup>
- **La Via Campesina — Central Nacional de Trabajadores del Campo (CNTC)**, an advocacy group promoting the rights of peasants and farmworkers in indigenous and rural communities, especially around issues of food sovereignty and environmental justice.<sup>4</sup>
- **Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH)**, an advocacy group advancing the work and legacy of environmental defense advocate, Berta Cáceres, and uplifting the needs of the Lenca people and other indigenous communities.<sup>5</sup>
- **Casa Alianza** — subsidiary of Covenant House — which operates residential centers that provide support and resources to homeless and returning migrant youth.<sup>6</sup>



Delegation members meet with Grupo Sociedad Civil.



## Guatemala

From August 17, 2022, through August 19, 2022, the delegation met with various journalists, academics, and advocacy groups in Guatemala, including:

- **Gladys Tzul**, Guatemalan Maya K'iche' activist, academic, and sociologist.
- **Oswaldo Samayoa**, legal scholar, and professor of law at Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala and Universidad Rafael Landívar.
- **Haroldo Sánchez**, noted journalist.
- **Agencia Ocote**, an organization focused on multidisciplinary and investigative journalism covering issues of social justice and promoting public discourse.<sup>7</sup>
- **Asociación Pop No'j**, an organization focused on the empowerment of indigenous communities through research and advocacy.<sup>8</sup>
- **Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) — Guatemala**, an academic institution that develops research, training, and advocacy programs to tackle structural challenges in Guatemala.<sup>9</sup>



Delegation members meet with FLACSO.

# Forces of Migration

## *¿Quién cuida a las que cuidan?* **Who takes care of the caretakers?**

In Guatemala and Honduras, similar to the rest of Central America, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic fell most heavily on women. Honduras has limited health services available to combat the devastating nature of the pandemic, particularly in low-income and rural communities. Women assumed the role of caretakers, maintaining this role even when they were sick themselves. At the height of the pandemic, the general lack of accessible health care services was exacerbated by the isolation caused by a government-imposed quarantine. The lockdown brought with it a noticeable rise in violence, particularly domestic and sexual violence. From March 2020, when the Honduran government mandated a curfew due to the COVID-19 pandemic, until the end of 2020, it was reported that 229 women were violently killed.<sup>10</sup> The number of emergency calls to address domestic violence also rose drastically since the start of the pandemic. For example, in 2021, there were 46,016 reported emergency calls, and by early 2022, there are already 22,899 emergency calls registered.<sup>11</sup> A similar upward trend has been observed in intrafamily violence.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine caused women to stop work, resulting in a lack of financial resources to provide food for their families. As a result, poverty became more entrenched, impacting their economic autonomy and limiting opportunities to leave abusive relationships.

For children in Honduras, the COVID-19 pandemic deeply impacted their access to education, as only those with access to technology and stable internet could continue their schooling throughout the pandemic. During this time, the focus for many families was simply survival. If a family had any disposable income, it was usually used to put food on the table, not to purchase devices or technological equipment. Guatemalan children had a similar experience since approximately 50% of school aged children experienced inaccessibility to education due to the pandemic.

In Guatemala, the pandemic also exacerbated unemployment conditions. Pre-pandemic, 80% of Guatemalans held some form of informal employment. The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the middle class due to the closure of businesses, particularly in the service industry. According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic wiped out three decades of economic growth in Guatemala and increased the poverty rate from 47.8% of the population in 2019 to 52.4% in 2020.<sup>13</sup>



## Forced Internal Displacement

Several of the organizations that the delegation met with emphasized the relationship between forced internal displacement and external migration. Indeed, for many this phenomenon occurs in stages: people living in rural communities are pushed out due to violence caused by organized crime or inhospitable conditions resulting from extreme poverty and extreme weather due to climate change. People migrate to the city hoping to find better conditions, but ultimately migrate further due to the rampant violence and lack of economic opportunities in the urban areas. Experts report that approximately 500 people flee Honduras daily. Among those migrating from other countries through Honduras approximately 30% ultimately remain in Honduras. For this reason, there is now a strong presence of Cubans and Venezuelans in Honduras.



Delegation members meet with CIPRODEH.

Human rights organizations argue that the Honduran government has failed to address the root causes of forced displacement, particularly violence. As experts noted, the government fails to examine why people are leaving. For the last three years, advocates have attempted to address forced internal displacement through policies such as *Ley de Prevención, Atención, y Protección de las Personas Desplazadas Forzadamente* (Law of Prevention, Care, and Protection of Forcibly Displaced Persons). This bill aims to make resources more readily available to offer humanitarian assistance and protection to people displaced by violence and organized crime, but it remains stalled.<sup>14</sup>

In Guatemala, human rights groups described the severe challenges in combatting the proliferation of violence. The country's civil wars were settled via peace agreements that attempted to dislodge the military from its long-term role as the ultimate political power. Yet the military has since regained dominance as the leading institution when it comes to settling internal political conflicts. Justice systems have been effectively co-opted, frustrating any real chance to hold official and other perpetrators of corruption and violence accountable for their actions. The broad perception by human rights defenders is that violence, once again, has become normalized.




**And God too was in exile, migrating  
without end. . . .**

**he said to us in his Sunday sermon  
as he baptized the banished and  
exiled, the landless and poor, in the  
waters of the dying Lempa River:**

**“Let those who would come with  
me to the United States leave their  
families behind and abandon the  
gangs, the violence, the hunger and  
misery, and forsake the despicable  
bosses and oligarchs of Central  
America, and follow me;**





**... the Lord recalled in visions his  
disciple...asked him once, as they  
lay in the shade of a ceiba tree. ...  
“Teacher, what should we do if they  
detain and deport us?” to which  
He responded, “You must migrate  
seventy times seven, and if they  
ask you for dollars and deport you  
again, give them all you have, your  
garment, your backpack, your water  
bottle, your shoes, and shake the  
dust from your feet, and migrate  
once more from Central America and  
Mexico without turning, ever again,  
to look back ...”**

Selection from  
“Sermon of the  
Migrant (Beneath a  
Ceiba Tree)” by Latin  
American poet Balam  
Rodrigo, in his book  
*Central American Book  
of the Dead*.

Published by Impresora  
y Encuadernadora  
Progreso, S.A. de C.V.  
(IEPSA) in April 2018.  
Translated by LCR staff.

# Forces of Migration

## Dangers Along the Migration Route

According to experts from FLACSO, about 100 Guatemalans flee the country every two hours. Asociación Pop No'j noted that indigenous migrants from Guatemala often experience apprehensions and detention along the migrant route due to a lack of language access. For instance, in Huehuetenango, which borders Mexico, 58% of the population identifies as indigenous. Due to the diversity of ethnic groups within the indigenous population, 9 different languages are spoken with the dominant language being Mam — not Spanish.<sup>15</sup> Language barriers present challenges along the migrant route as it's far less likely that they will encounter someone who speaks their indigenous language. FLACSO reports that approximately 45% of Guatemalans identify as indigenous, with only about 30% of them fluent in Spanish. Indigenous migrants therefore are less likely to be able to explain their circumstances — including why they are fleeing — if stopped by law enforcement officers, increasing the chances of detention.

FLACSO also reports that 80% of Guatemalans use a coyote<sup>16</sup> when attempting to migrate. In Mexico, the cost of a coyote is approximately \$5,000 to \$7,000 per person. But in Guatemala a coyote costs approximately \$10,000 to \$20,000, depending on travel conditions and the number of border crossing attempts included in the rate. The duration of the journey may span 30 to 50 days. Migrants often describe the last 15 days, the portion of the journey in close proximity to the U.S. border, as *el infiernito* — little hell — a point at which migrants are often vulnerable to kidnapping, extortion, mutilation, and rape. Individuals with family members already in the U.S. are especially vulnerable to kidnapping because they are viewed as financially exploitable.



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# Economic Forces in Central America

## Poverty: Lack of Opportunity

The embracing of economic policies that systematically denied basic economic and social wellbeing is nothing new in the region. The historic denial of democratic rights was an essential factor in keeping most people in Central America subjected to highly oppressive conditions. Despite peace agreements reached in early to mid-1990s, as well as the nominal evolution towards seemingly democratic forms of governance, what has not changed is the life conditions for most people in Honduras and Guatemala.

According to Via Campesina, approximately 60% of Hondurans live in poverty, with 54% of them living in extreme poverty. In Honduras, the wealthiest 9% of the population controls about 90% of the country's resources, generating extreme income inequality.

Similarly, in Guatemala, the wealthiest 10% of the population controls approximately 50% of the national wealth.<sup>17</sup> According to FLACSO, the average Guatemalan family lives off \$2 per day. Guatemala has an 80% underemployment and unemployment rate, as such families must maintain two to three jobs to survive. Immense Guatemalan wealth disparities are also reflected geographically. FLACSO indicated that approximately ten of the country's 340 municipalities enjoy conditions akin to "first world countries," yet a great majority of Guatemalan municipalities lack access to reliable electricity, water, and sanitation.<sup>18</sup>

## Dependence on Remittances

United States efforts to reduce immigration have greatly impacted Central American countries as their local economies rely heavily on the money that immigrants working in the U.S. send back home to their families. For example, experts noted that as much as 50% of the Honduran economy consists of remittances. Honduras received approximately \$583 million in remittances, in January 2022 alone, from immigrants living abroad.<sup>19</sup> The same can be said for the Guatemalan economy. By the end of 2021, Guatemala had received approximately \$15.2 billion in remittances.<sup>20</sup> The central role played by remittances in propping up the economy results in lukewarm efforts to control or reduce migration.

Heavy reliance on remittances disincentivizes government investment in education, housing, or employment. In many cases, remittances substitute for the absence of a social safety net in Honduras and Guatemala.

Increasingly, in response to government repression and persecution, remittances are also being used to bail out advocates who have been criminalized for their human rights and environmental justice work in Honduras and Guatemala.

## Entrepreneurship

Honduras and Guatemala lack a robust apparatus to support entrepreneurship. The current conditions are in dire need of backbone support structures, including reliable access to credit, capital, financial and technical services, and infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, business owners must also deal with the looming threat of extortion from gangs.

A current model promoting entrepreneurial growth is Casa Alianza, which serves a wide range of social and community functions in Honduras. The organization provides out-of-home care for approximately 75 youth who were forcibly displaced from their communities due to violence. As part of its wrap-around and holistic support services, Casa Alianza recently launched an impressive Center for Entrepreneurship to support the youth in its care. Designed to inspire and support entrepreneurial aspirations, the center provides youth with technical training to create the conditions for economic empowerment. As youth leave Casa Alianza, they will be able to reintegrate into the community with the skills to launch and operate their own enterprises, including food businesses, beauty salons, and barber shops. This programming showcases the creativity and vitality of community-based interventions centered on tackling economic exclusion and forced displacement due to violence. Economic justice and opportunity are critical to help foster democracy in Central America.





Delegation members  
touring Casa Alianza.





# Freedom of the Press:

## The Rise and Prominence of Misinformation

Globalization and the internet have resulted in the widespread distribution of information. While it is truly triumphant that people have access to a greater amount of information, it comes with pitfalls. Misinformation has been on the rise both in Honduras and Guatemala including through the proliferation of *prensa amarillista* — yellow journalism — sensationalized media coverage aimed at increasing circulation.<sup>22</sup> Media outlets often rely on dubious statistics in their reporting.

In Honduras, CIPRODEH noted the history of misinformation, particularly created by the regime of Juan Orlando Hernandez, who was recently extradited to New York to face drug smuggling charges.



Delegation members  
with Agencia Ocote.



In Guatemala, independent media organizations, such as Agencia Ocote, are at the forefront of the battle against misinformation. Agencia Ocote has spearheaded various projects combating misinformation around issues such as abortion, reproductive rights, gender identity, and gender expression. In order to amplify its reach, Agencia Ocote partners with community-based radio stations, especially in indigenous communities with limited access to internet and technology.

Most recently, Agencia Ocote has become a vital voice debunking fake news focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, especially around the vaccine.<sup>23</sup> At the onset of the pandemic, Agencia Ocote exposed discrepancies in the Guatemalan government's underreporting of COVID-19 related deaths. The National Registry of People (RENAP), a public institution, published COVID-19 deaths that were at odds with those recorded by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MSPAS).<sup>24</sup> However, RENAP denied several vital statistic records requests from Agencia Ocote and similar organizations regarding their COVID-19 death count, instead demanding payment for generating public information. This is at odds with Guatemala's law granting access to public information free of charge.<sup>25</sup> In November 2020, Agencia Ocote proceeded with legal action against RENAP.<sup>26</sup> Their efforts were triumphant as RENAP ultimately reached an agreement to provide vital statistics free of charge pursuant to Guatemalan law.<sup>27</sup>

# Corruption & Impunity

## Endemic Corruption

Legal scholars consistently note the insidious corruption entrenched in the Guatemalan government. For instance, the recent controversy surrounding President Alejandro Giammettei launching a new executive office, Comisión Presidencial de Centro de Gobierno, and appointing his alleged partner, Luis Miguel Martínez Morales, as its director.<sup>28</sup> The office shut down in December 2020 due to various scandals related to nepotism, corruption, and mismanagement of funds.<sup>29</sup> The credibility and integrity of the courts in Guatemala are dubious given that many appointments are rumored to have been given due to political favors. For instance, Dina Ochoa was appointed to the Supreme Court despite having played a role in the dismantlement of the International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG), an international body charged with investigating and prosecuting corruption in Guatemala.<sup>30</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic also created new opportunities for corruption. CIPRODEH monitored the uptick of fraud in hospitals allegedly purchasing personal protective equipment and health-related products. For example, Honduran officials purportedly spent millions of dollars purchasing ventilators, but few arrived in hospitals, and most were nonfunctional.

The pervasiveness of impunity in the region runs deep. In Honduras, only 24% of homicide cases are investigated, with only 13% reaching a conviction.<sup>31</sup> Guatemala mirrors these rates—where about 98% of crimes have gone unpunished since 2018.<sup>32</sup>

## Prosecution of Journalists

Both the Honduran and Guatemalan governments have attempted to systematically silence and limit the press through the prosecution of journalists with dubious charges. Recently, Guatemalan authorities arrested Jose Ruben Zamora, a prominent journalist, for alleged money laundering.<sup>33</sup> Haroldo Sánchez, founder of the media platform Factor4, reported that there have been approximately 350 recent instances of harassment and assault targeted at various journalists, which have been tracked by the Association of Guatemalan Journalists.<sup>34</sup> Sánchez discussed the heightened retaliation against independent journalists as an effort to intimidate and censor them, which can involve blacklisting and even legally prosecuting journalists. Sánchez has personally experienced being ousted from his professional field.



Delegation members  
with legal scholar  
Oswaldo Samayoa.

### Militarization

In Honduras and Guatemala, the military has a stranglehold on democracy. The military works in concert with local police purportedly to maintain public safety. However, this militarization can be ripe for abuse. According to CIPRODEH, the pandemic has produced an increase in police abuse through false arrests, detainments, and complaints of torture.

In Honduras, as the Xiomara Castro Administration came into power, there was a surge of anti-militarism — analogous to the Defund the Police movement in the U.S. — calling for the abolition of the armed forces. Abolition is an ambitious goal that has slowly faded as the military has preserved its authority and influence. The military's source of authority is deeply rooted in the constitution — a pact between the political and military branches that emerged as countries experienced turmoil and civil war. The intense presence of the police and military is embedded in Honduran society, including entanglement with organized crime. The rampant violence is leading to privatization of security leaving low-income families to fend for themselves.

### Lack of Pro Bono Legal Services

There is a great need for pro bono services in the legal system in Honduras and Guatemala. Currently, the institutions that offer pro bono legal services are meager. In Guatemala, limited pro bono services are offered by law students in clinical programs, but they are overwhelmed.

In recent years, Guatemala created victim support services, but they are already embroiled with allegations of corruption and nepotism.<sup>35</sup>

There are an extremely limited number of pro bono attorneys who serve indigenous communities. For instance, the Asociación de Abogados y Notarios Mayas de Guatemala is a bar association of indigenous attorneys committed to pro bono work,<sup>36</sup> but more resources and legal services are needed.



# Vulnerable Populations in Central America

## Violence Against Women

Decades ago, immigrants from Central America tended to be men who would work in the U.S. and send money back to their countries to support their families. This has shifted in recent years as a huge influx of women migrate to the U.S. A similar trend is found internally as women are displaced from rural communities in Honduras and Guatemala. Domestic violence is one of the main causes for women's forced displacement.

Violence against women is pervasive in Central America. Honduras holds the highest femicide rate in Latin America. There were 278 violent deaths in 2020.<sup>37</sup> That number increased to 342 violent deaths in 2021.<sup>38</sup> Femicide rates are increasing with more than 177 violent deaths of women by early 2022.<sup>39</sup> Kidnapping also increased, this was the case even for communities not known for violence. The lack of institutional support from the government and barriers in accessing justice by victims of gender-based violence propels many women to flee. It is not an uncommon experience for victims of sexual and domestic violence to be dismissed by police or prosecutors. Thus, leaving them with an impossible choice: return to the abuser or leave all together.

Advocacy groups view femicide as backlash in response to women's rise to prominence in society. In communities where women assert their rights, many report violent acts against them. For this reason, organizations such as COPINH are providing women with empowerment and educational opportunities.



Delegation members  
with Via Campesina.

## Children & Youth

In recent years, large numbers of unaccompanied minors have fled violence in Central America. This pattern has continued during the pandemic.

Families flee because they fear that gangs will force their children to join their ranks. Indeed, young boys between ten to fourteen years old are often recruited by gangs. Young girls are sought out for sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Due to the high rate of adult men migrating, children as young as ten years old are often left responsible for their family, which in turn makes migrating an appealing choice.

In response to the family separation crisis at the U.S. border, Asociación Pop No'j collaborated with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) to help reunite indigenous children with their parents in Huehuetenango. This work continues today. In the week that the delegation visited in August 2022, Asociación Pop No'j assisted with three cases of family reunification. Asociación Pop No'j is also supporting unaccompanied minors who are apprehended by U.S. immigration officials and deported.

# Vulnerable Populations in Central America

## Indigenous Populations

Central America is rich with indigenous roots, cultures, and languages. However, indigenous people have been historically marginalized and stigmatized due to the legacy of colonialism, which resulted in the impoverishment and exploitation of indigenous communities. Remarkably, indigenous communities have resisted and survived in significant numbers, particularly in Guatemala.

Indigenous communities often have the least access to basic services and resources as they often reside in remote and rural areas with limited infrastructure. For instance, rural communities may have one regional school or health clinic, typically not well maintained, or adequately equipped.

Via Campesina stressed that land remains a constant source of tension and conflict for indigenous communities. They reported that approximately 86% of women do not own land compared to 67% of men. Another challenge is that about 80% of properties in Honduras do not have documented or registered titles. Legal battles to obtain proper title for land ownership are not uncommon, particularly with respect to indigenous lands.<sup>40</sup>

In Honduras, COPINH prides itself in operating as a multicultural institution that values the indigenous Lenca culture. The organization strives to preserve indigenous identity and culture intergenerationally. For example, it actively educates younger generations about ancestral practices, including the importance of herbal medicines. COPINH also runs programs to educate and train indigenous teachers who are committed to remaining — and working — in rural communities. This work helps prevent the cultural erasure that results from displacement and migration. COPINH also focuses on supporting and protecting midwives—who are often prosecuted by the Honduran government’s repressive laws which are designed to severely limit access to reproductive health and abortion.

COPINH is promoting economic empowerment in the Lenca community actively organizing farmers and peasants to demand fair prices for their crops, including organically grown corn, beans, and coffee. They are currently lobbying to have the Honduran government purchase crops directly from Lenca growers and producers.

Turning to Guatemala, the indigenous landscape is rich and varied with approximately 22 languages among the Maya people. Against this backdrop, indigenous people face major language barriers and hurdles. For example, access to basic services is often contingent on speaking and understanding Spanish. This language gap is exacerbated by the absence of multilingual education. An alarming 50% of adult indigenous women and about 25% of adult indigenous men are illiterate.<sup>41</sup>

Deeply rooted in Maya traditions, Asociación Pop No'j works extensively in Huehuetenango, near Guatemala's border with Mexico. At the crossroads of the migrant route, the area is known as *la puerta hacia el norte* — the doorway to the north. Asociación Pop No'j conducts extensive advocacy surrounding immigration issues and indigenous empowerment.<sup>42</sup> Since the end of Guatemala's civil war, the organization has played a critical role in reconstituting and reconstructing *el tejido social* — the social fabric, including institutions, structures, and networks to ensure the post-war reintegration of the civilian population.



Site visit with  
Asociación Pop  
No'j in Guatemala.



# Ojer bix re ri kik'el

Man xintu' ta ri', ri kaxlan tzijobalil  
are taq xinalaxik.

Ri nuch'abalil xalax cho k'iche'laj  
xuquje jas ne' ulew ri unaba'il,  
ri kich'abalil ri wati't numan are ri' ri wachoch.

Are we kinch'awik para kaxlan tzij,  
xa je ta che kinkoj jun k'ak' lawe  
ri kutor jun uchi' ja chik ri kok cho jun k'ak' ulew  
ri jawi ri tzij k'o wi chi ri kakibij  
k'o wi chi ri kinaba'il che ri ulew.

Wa kaxlan tzij are una'tasibal re jun k'ex,  
xuquje man kink'ix ta wib we kintrijon chupam  
rumal che loq'om wa  
ruk' ri kikik'el re ri nuxe'tayil uwi' nujolom.

Pa wa jun kak' ch'abalil  
kink'ut chawe ri ukotz'ijal re ri nubix,  
ri una'bal re k'o wi chi taq bis  
xuquje uwachibal re k'o wi chi taq ki'kotemal...

Wa kaxlan tzij xa jun lawe chik  
che ubixoxik ri ojer bix re ri nukik'el.

# The Ancient Song of My Blood

I didn't drink Spanish  
from my mother's breast when I came into the world.

My language was born  
among the trees, and tastes like earth;  
my grandparent's language is my home,

If I use this language that's not mine,  
I use it like a shiny key  
to open doors to another world  
where the words have another voice  
and another way of connecting to the earth.

This language is the memory of pain  
and I speak it without fear or pain  
because my ancestors bought it  
with their blood.

In this new language  
I'll show you my flowering song,  
I'll bring you the taste of other laments  
the color of other joys....

This language is only one more key  
to sing the ancient song of my blood.

Poem by Ki'che Maya Poet Humberto Ak'abal.  
Translated into English by Paul M. Worley.

# Vulnerable Populations in Central America

## LGBTQ+ Community

Honduras and Guatemala are dangerous for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

A recent legislative proposal in Guatemala sought to ban same-sex marriages by expressly defining a family as strictly consisting of a father, mother, and their biological children — thus attempting to systematically exclude and delegitimize same-sex couples, single parents, and many other households.<sup>43</sup> The bill gained much momentum, but it was ultimately shelved after significant public push-back.<sup>44</sup>

Trans women are particularly vulnerable in Central America. Violence against trans women is shockingly common. Even when victims report violent incidents, the perpetrators are not held accountable. Dozens of LGBT hate crimes have been recently documented and reported in Guatemala, including the assassination of trans rights leaders.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Honduras has been flagged as one of the most hostile countries for trans women.<sup>46</sup> The pervasive violence and discrimination experienced by trans women propels them to flee abroad.<sup>47</sup>

## Human Rights Defenders

Defenders of human rights are regularly targeted, threatened, and killed in these two countries. According to Human Rights Watch, at least ten human rights defenders were recently murdered in Honduras, while about 199 human rights defenders were harassed, threatened, or attacked — 80% of whom were advocating for environmental justice or land rights.<sup>48</sup> In 2021, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights estimated a 90% impunity rate in Honduras related to crimes against human rights defenders.<sup>49</sup> Tragically, nearly all of the experts the delegation consulted in Honduras and Guatemala were working under duress or death threats.

Women are often targeted for persecution. For example, Via Campesina reported that in 2021, about 2,000 women were harassed, threatened, or prosecuted for their public advocacy, particularly around land rights. This has created an exodus of community leaders who are fleeing repression.

## Deported Immigrants

A devastating reality of fleeing is that you may not reach safety. Sadly, conditions are often more dire for individuals who are deported or expelled back to their home countries. This is due to a complex constellation of factors that aggravate and compound negative outcomes. Fleeing often entails selling homes, land, crops, and possessions — even incurring crippling debt — to fund the journey. People who do not succeed are left with limited economic recourse. They also face heightened risk of persecution and violence. The local media has documented many incidents of recently-deported immigrants who were prime targets for extortion and violence. Families are increasingly reporting that their recently-deported persons were killed or disappeared shortly after being returned to Central America. A growing number of deported immigrants have been found dead within days of arriving in Honduras or Guatemala.

Experts attribute these disturbing incidents to the fact that recently deported individuals are unfamiliar with the current country conditions. They often return to communities that are now controlled by gangs. Deported immigrants are also perceived by gangs as having access to money through personal savings and relatives in the United States or abroad.<sup>50</sup> Recently deported immigrants are often unfamiliar with gang extortions and are killed after failing or refusing to pay tribute.<sup>51</sup> Others who originally fled to escape gang recruitment and violence return only to be found and killed.<sup>52</sup>

Deported individuals who survive this toxic mix of precarity and violence also face significant stigma. Deported immigrants are stigmatized because they are presumed to have been expelled from the United States for doing something wrong. There is a strong sense that “bad” people get deported — not surprising given how much publicity the U.S. government gives to the deportation and removal of “bad hombres.”



Artwork at  
Casa Alianza.



# Environmental Justice & Climate Change

## No Current Protections Under Existing Immigration Jurisprudence

While the root causes of migration are complex and multifaceted, with each passing year, it is clear that environmental stressors are a growing threat and trigger. Storms, droughts, floods, temperature fluctuations, and sea level changes are just some of the recent manifestations of climate change that continue to uproot the lives of thousands, creating unbearable living conditions in Central America. Climate change is jeopardizing access to food, water, and other necessities.<sup>53</sup> From 2020 to 2021, about 1.3 million people were internally displaced in Honduras and Guatemala due to devastating weather-related disasters such as Hurricanes Eta and Iota.<sup>54</sup>

Marginalized communities, such as those living in rural areas, are the most vulnerable to displacement due to climate change. Displacement often starts with moving from a rural community to an urban location. However, without adequate support and infrastructure, fleeing abroad often becomes the only viable option for climate refugees.

In the U.S., our current immigration system fails to meet the protection needs of climate refugees within our existing legal framework. For example, asylum protections focus on those fleeing persecution primarily based on race; religion; nationality; membership in a particular social group; or political opinion.<sup>55</sup> Unless a climate refugee can demonstrate that they squarely fall within the established legal categories, they are denied protection.

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is the only existing legal mechanism that addresses — in an extremely limited way — some aspects of climate change and displacement.<sup>56</sup> TPS provides immigration relief and protection to individuals who are unable to return to their countries of origin as a result of armed conflict and natural disasters.

Although TPS addresses natural disasters, there are limitations to its usefulness. First, it requires the federal government to designate a country for TPS relief<sup>57</sup> and such designation must be published in the Federal Register.<sup>58</sup> Despite climate change impacting much of Latin America, limited TPS designations exist for certain nationals from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Haiti, and Venezuela.<sup>59</sup> Many relevant countries are excluded, including Guatemala.

Notably, TPS cannot aid new or incoming migrants because it only applies to individuals who are already present in the U.S. when the designation is made. Those displaced by the underlying circumstances and en route to the U.S. are not protected.

In October 2021, the Biden Administration released an analysis of the impact of climate on migration.<sup>60</sup> The report listed recommendations such as providing aid to countries experiencing climate-related disasters and maintaining a tracking system of extreme weather events that may lead to displacement. It also suggested the expansion of legal protections afforded to environmentally displaced individuals.<sup>61</sup> Dedicated legal protections for climate refugees are desperately needed.

## More Severe and Frequent Natural Disasters

Natural disasters and extreme weather events present serious challenges in Central America. The region is experiencing more severe and frequent hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and storms.<sup>62</sup> The whipsaw cycling between floods and droughts increasingly leads to crop failure and famine, which in turn heightens acute food insecurity. Guatemala is among the countries with the highest rates of malnutrition. Approximately, 47% of all Guatemalan children are malnourished, including 68% of the indigenous communities in Huehuetenango.<sup>63</sup> Unsurprisingly, food insecurity is a huge push-factor for migration as roughly 25% of Central American families who experience food scarcity plan to migrate, compared to 7% of families not experiencing food scarcity.<sup>64</sup>

The uncontrolled extraction of natural resources in countries like Honduras and Guatemala are intensifying the devastating effects of environmental degradation and its impact on communities. Water access is particularly at risk. Experts in Honduras and Guatemala note that mining companies and agribusiness are monopolizing water, including diverting rivers away from inhabited areas reliant on the steady stream of water. For example, the

export-oriented production of palm oil — extracted from the fruit of palm oil trees — reduces land availability and deteriorates soil quality for subsistence farming. To make matters worse, palm trees are notorious water guzzlers.<sup>65</sup> In palm oil growing areas, rivers have reportedly dried up uprooting entire communities and countless families.



Traditional Lenca ceremony at COPINH in Honduras.

## Exploitation and Extraction of Natural Resources

In Honduras, after the 2009 military-backed coup, the government declared the country as “open for business,” and passed a variety of laws friendly to the mining and energy industries. From 2010 to 2014, the Honduran government granted concessions for logging and mining in indigenous communities along with major hydroelectrical projects along rivers. In most cases, the concessions were granted without consulting the affected indigenous communities. The same trend is found in Guatemala.

In Honduras, COPINH had long opposed the construction of the infamous Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Project, a joint Honduran-Chinese project along the Gualcarque River. The river is sacred to the Lenca people. The proposed dam will wither the water supply, making survival impossible for Lenca villages dependent on the sacred river. Berta Caceres, co-founder of COPINH, fiercely campaigned against the project since 2006 until her assassination in 2016. Upon her death, COPINH organized and obtained the support necessary to assemble an independent committee of international legal experts to investigate Caceres’ death.<sup>66</sup> To date, far too many people who orchestrated Caceres’ execution remain in impunity demonstrating the colossal failure of the local legal and judicial system.

Academic Gladys Tzul noted a disturbing pattern of entrenched economic interests advancing divisive narratives and portraying indigenous community leaders as “terrorists.”<sup>67</sup>



The delegation at the COPINH compound, Utopia, alongside Bertha Zúñiga Cáceres and COPINH members in Honduras. Structures in the compound incorporate bioconstruction features.







Utopia is COPINH's meeting center, "a space open to all who dream of a fairer world. A world where many worlds fit, because another world is only possible by building it right here, collectively sowing in our lands the native seeds of freedom, justice, peace, memory, community..."



Photo of the walls of Utopia:

"It is the time of fear,  
Women's fear of men's violence  
Men's fear of fearless women"





Bertha Zúñiga Cáceres at her mother's tomb, the internationally renowned environmental justice advocate, Berta Cáceres.

Tombstone reads:  
**"We must awaken!**  
**Wake up humanity!**  
**There is no more time."**



# U.S. Government Involvement & Responsibility

The full scope of U.S. involvement and responsibility in Central America has been the subject of significant scholarship. This report will focus on key elements that emerged during the delegation: **1)** sanctions and **2)** aid. In recent years, the U.S. Department of State has published “Engel’s List,” a compilation of individuals connected to corruption and organized crime in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who are denied entry into the U.S.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, the list holds little weight as individuals are unmoved by the toothless measures. Those featured on “Engel’s List” often publicly mock the designation and even wear it as badge of honor.<sup>69</sup> For instance, Guatemalan Attorney General Consuelo Porras was sanctioned in September 2021, but her political appointment was unaffected.<sup>70</sup> Local experts and advocates strongly advised moving in the direction of real consequences for those on “Engel’s List,” including government officials who harbor them.

During the course of the delegation, experts and advocates urged U.S. investment through the United States Agency for International Development (“USAID”) on community-driven organizations and projects that stand to benefit everyday people. They also urged greater transparency on USAID investments.

# Recommendations

*Based on our fact-finding mission and the details laid out in this report, the delegation specifically calls for the following immediate recommendations to be championed by the Biden/Harris Administration in partnership with Congressional leadership:*

- + Federal policy towards Central America must consider the complex factors and realities that each country in the region faces— including the conditions outlined in this report. Diplomatic Missions and Consulates must be adequately staffed and trained.
- + U.S. diplomacy in Central America must focus on the deliberate and intentional preservation of freedom of the press and the right to access information. This is crucial to promote democracy and transparency.
- + Federal immigration officials and immigration judges should be trained on the root causes of Central American migration to better understand the reality of forced displacement due to violence, particularly along gender lines.
- + As it currently stands, Engel’s List is ineffective and toothless. Those on the list must face real consequences well beyond visa revocation. Central American government actors must be held individually responsible, penalized, and sanctioned for shielding and harboring individuals on the list.
- + U.S. investments in the region must be tailored to promote equitable growth and access to justice. Such initiatives must reach far beyond the current approaches and engage with a broader cohort of partners. Nationals of Central American countries living in the United States, so-called “diaspora” communities, represent a neglected and potentially powerful constituency for these reforms. In addition, USAID must become more transparent and aligned with community-based priorities and initiatives.
- + The federal government must create legal protections for climate refugees. Congress should explore expanding immigration protections to people fleeing environmental devastation. At a minimum, our limited existing protections—such as TPS—should be dramatically expanded to adequately respond to environmental cataclysms through timely designation of countries affected by these events.
- + The federal government should extend the right to counsel to individuals in immigration proceedings. No individual or family should be required to navigate the complex immigration apparatus without legal representation and should be fully capable of exercising their rights.

# Recommendations

*State and local officials can also play a more active role in creating local conditions that support the immigrant community. Although immigration is a core responsibility of the federal government, state and local officials can and should:*

- + Learn more about the lived experience of immigrants and the conditions of the countries of origin of the people who live in their districts.
- + Take immediate steps to ensure that public policies and services at the state and local level meet the needs of all residents, including immigrants.

**An intersectional and multi-disciplinary lens is vital to create more effective and holistic solutions to current migration trends.**

# Conclusion

Central American immigrants are not inclined or eager to leave their home countries — quite the opposite, it is a toxic mix of violence, impunity, and climate change that compels people to flee. The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis lay bare existing and persistent inequities in Honduras and Guatemala. By many measures, both countries are failing. They are plagued with inadequate basic services and infrastructure, extreme food insecurity, alarming gang and gender-based violence, and government corruption. These challenges coexist with the intense militarization of society. Year after year, climate change and environmental degradation wreak havoc on the region. This reality triggers migrant caravans.

In the U.S., government officials, policymakers, attorneys, and community leaders should develop greater familiarity with the root causes of migration to understand why families, women, and children flee their homes. This is particularly useful to better service the growing Central American and immigrant population.

As this report demonstrates, immigration is complex and multifaceted. An intersectional and multi-disciplinary lens is vital to create more effective and holistic solutions to current migration trends.



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67. See also Martyna Starosta, *She Defended Her Land Against a Mine in Guatemala. Then She Flew in Fear of Her Life*, THE INTERCEPT (June 23, 2019), <https://theintercept.com/2019/06/23/guatemala-land-defender-san-rafael-mine/>. (“They start to portray human rights defenders as terrorists,” said Maria Reyes. . . . Extractive industries push the narrative that “this isn’t a peaceful protest, but rather a blockade that is violating the rights of others.”).
68. Popularly known as “Engel’s List,” it is named after the key sponsor of the law, then-U.S. Representative Eliot L. Engel of New York. See Press Release, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Engel U.S. -Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act Passes Congress (Dec. 22, 2020), <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/2020/12/engel-u-s-northern-triangle-enhanced-engagement-act-passes-congress>.
69. Roman Gressier & Jose Luis Sanz, *U.S. Shows Its Teeth on Engel List*, EL FARO (June 18, 2022), <https://elfaro.net/en/202207/centroamerica/26278/US-Shows-Its-Teeth-on-Engel-List.htm>.
70. *Id.*

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