

Guatemala, June 2018

Dear Sir, Madam,

We are writing to you from **Peace Brigades International (PBI)**, an international non-governmental organisation that works for peace, non-violence and human rights, to update you on the current human rights situation in Guatemala.

The purpose of this **UPDATE** on the alert which we published in May 2018, is to draw your attention to and share our serious concern about the **continuation and increase in security incidents** against accompanied organisations and individuals.

**The context described in the May alert is seriously and rapidly deteriorating. Since the three murders communicated in our May alert, three more land rights defenders have been killed.** Ramón Choc Sacrab, member of the Altiplano Campesino Committee (CCDA), leader and indigenous authority of the Ixloc community, San Pedrito, Cobán, Alta Verapaz, was attacked with a knife on 30<sup>th</sup> May and died the next day. On 4<sup>th</sup> June the bodies of Florencio Pérez Nájera and Alejandro Hernández García, both members of the Campesino Development Committee (CODECA) from Jutiapa, were found. Both died from machete wounds. **The six human rights defenders killed in this short period of time worked in defense of land and territorial rights**, an activity which has become, without doubt, the highest risk in Guatemala. People who defend their land and territory routinely receive threats that often end in violent deaths.

In addition, security incidents affecting the organisations and people we accompany have not ceased since the publication of our May alert. On the contrary, PBI has observed an increase in strong threats and intimidation, especially against the **New Day' Ch'orti' Campesino Central Coordinator (CCCND)** and **the Peaceful Resistance of Cahabón**. The following is a summary of the recent security incidents:

### CCCND:

- During the early hours of 22<sup>nd</sup> May, unknown actors shot at a vehicle owned by CCCND, which was parked in front of the house of the General Coordinator, Omar Jerónimo. They also left a message on newspaper that was taken as evidence by the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP). This attack was reported to the National Civil Police (PNC) and the MP, who later arrived at the scene.
- Since 23<sup>rd</sup> May, groups of armed men have been observed in the communities of Lelá Chancó and Lelá Obraje (Camotán) and community leaders, Héctor Ovidio Vásquez Gómez and Pedro Esquivel Martínez, have received verbal threats.
- Since 25<sup>th</sup> May, community members have observed unidentified vehicles, pick-up trucks with tinted windows, driving around the above-mentioned communities, stopping for periods of 15-20 minutes in different areas of the communities.
- These incidents coincide with the following statements by the Mayor of Camotán: that in "two months [he] will be able to work in peace" without any opposition from the communities, and that "who [he] hates is that Indian Cobanero who works in Nuevo Día", making reference to Jeremías Hernández Estrada, Maya Kakchiquel, who holds the position of Technical Coordinator at CCCND.

- On 24<sup>th</sup> May, when Héctor Ovidio Vásquez Gómez was leaving his house in Lelá Chancó (Camotán), a neighbour advised him not to go out because he had seen armed men in military clothing around the community and they had told him that the Mayor had paid for the killing of Héctor Ovidio Vásquez Gómez, Pedro Esquivel Martínez and Silverio Pérez. According to the testimonies of the people accompanied by PBI, the armed men, despite their clothing, were not military, but people close to the Mayor of Camotán. Both Héctor Ovidio Vásquez Gomez and Pedro Esquivel Martínez have precautionary security measures, which they say are not being complied with.

#### **Pacific Resistance of Cahabón:**

- On 25<sup>th</sup> May, José Bo Mo, a member of the Peaceful Resistance of Cahabón, contacted PBI to inform us that his house, in the Las Tres Cruces village, was being surrounded by armed people linked to the company who were threatening him and his family. The aggressors stayed there for several hours but had left by the time the PNC arrived at the scene.
- On 26<sup>th</sup> May, José Bo Mo received death threats from one of the people who had participated in the events of the previous day, telling him that he was going to kill him because he was a nuisance to the community. This happened at the end of a meeting at Las Tres Cruces, in which both men had participated. José Bo Mo has precautionary security measures, which he says are not being complied with.
- On 29<sup>th</sup> May, the Peace Resistance of Cahabón organised a peaceful and authorised demonstration to coincide with a court hearing of the leader and criminalised defender, Bernardo Caal Xól. During the demonstration, people arrived armed with machetes and sticks and began making threats. The people demonstrating, among whom were the community leaders, Hipólito Coy Pop and Carlos Sotz, took refuge in the house of another member of the Resistance in the community of Sactá. The house was surrounded by a large group of people linked to the company, who were armed with sticks, machetes and stones, and made threats against the demonstrators. Finally the aggressors moved to a nearby road and the people seeking refuge the house left in a private vehicle, whilst receiving threats such as "we are going to burn the vehicle".

#### **In light of the above, we request that the international community carry out:**

- Visits to the affected regions and meetings with CCCND, the Peaceful Resistance of Cahabón and the Verapaz Union of Campesino Organizations (UVOC) and establish direct communication channels so that, in case of emergency, adequate protection mechanisms can be immediately applied. This also applies to CCDA and CODECA, since both organisations are victims of serious attacks that have resulted in the violent death of several of their leaders.
- Trial observation of the hearings of the criminalised human rights defenders to ensure that they take place in an environment free of threats, with respect for due process and in compliance with international human rights standards.
- Visits to criminalised defenders in the prisons where they are incarcerated.
- Public statements strongly supporting the defense of human rights in the context of the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, underlining the importance of the work of HRDs in upholding the rule of law.

- Close monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations adopted by the Government of Guatemala in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), especially those related to the protection of human rights defenders.
- Continued monitoring of the security situation of human rights defenders in the country.

**We also request that the international community, in its political dialogue with the Government of Guatemala:**

- Demand the protection of at-risk human rights defenders, guaranteeing their physical integrity and paying special attention to the members of CCCND, the Peaceful Resistance of Cahabón, UVOC, CCDA and CODECA.
- Demand prompt and impartial investigations, in accordance with the law, into the perpetrators responsible for both the planning and carrying out of these attacks, murders and intimidation.
- Emphasise to the President of the Republic the need to implement prevention and protection mechanisms for human rights defenders, highlighting: the importance of protection and prevention measures being consulted with the defenders, leaders and affected communities; that there should be an integrated and differential approach in the prevention of new aggressions; and that the protection measures granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) should be adequately implemented.
- Emphasise the importance of the role of human rights defenders as fundamental to upholding the rule of law.

PBI will continue to accompany the organisations and people mentioned and closely monitor their security situation.

Thank you in advance for your attention,

*Peace Brigades International (PBI)*