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# RI BULLETIN

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## A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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### **Forgotten People: Internally Displaced Persons in Guatemala**

Although the bitter 36-year civil war has come to an end, approximately 250,000 people remain internally displaced within Guatemala. While Communities of People in Resistance (CPRs) --- returning refugees and the displaced who organized during the war --- have been given government assistance to resettle, the government and international organizations have ignored or been unable to access a substantial portion of the internally displaced population.

The UN Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), mandated to monitor and verify compliance with the peace accords, ended its work in 2004. The Guatemalan government has not lived up to key agreements with the insurgents related to displaced populations, most importantly those related to support for resettlement, restitution of property, and economic reintegration. The internally displaced themselves are reluctant to press for their rights and prefer to remain anonymous for fear of triggering a further round of displacement and violence.

Living in the shadows of cities and in the inaccessible highlands, the remaining internally displaced persons are in danger of becoming completely forgotten by the Guatemalan government and by the world beyond. Their neglect by the government reflects historic patterns of marginalization of the indigenous peoples of the country. International involvement waned with the signing of the peace accords, which signaled to international organizations and others who might be active in Guatemala that the conflict had been resolved and that vigilance and active support and solidarity were no longer needed as they were in the 1980s and early 1990s.

### **People and the Land**

Located in Central America bordering Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, the population of Guatemala is about 20 million people. Over 60 percent of the population is indigenous, including the Xinca, Garífuna, and the Maya, who comprise the largest indigenous group. Historically, the Maya are located in rural and highland areas. However, some also reside in the capital and other urban centers. The remainder of the population is made up of a small percentage of Europeans and Ladinos, a *mestizo* population, and others who immigrated later for various reasons.

### **Roots of the Conflict**

The brutal civil war in Guatemala between the national government and leftist rebel groups was marked by 36 years of violence and mass displacement of the indigenous Maya population. The rebel groups claimed to be defending the rights of indigenous people and many of their adherents were recruited from among them. Many indigenous communities and their leaders, however, strived to be independent of the rebel groups, while resisting government counter-insurgency efforts, which included forced recruitment into Civil Defense Patrols and forced displacement into settlements that were virtual prisons guarded by the Guatemalan army.

Government repression and campaigns against indigenous communities were particularly terrifying during the governments of General Romeo Lucas García (1978-82) and Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), when 1.5 million people fled their homes to Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and beyond. In the span of two years, from 1981-1983, up to one million people were forced to flee their homes as a result of direct violence. The Maya population constituted over 80 percent of the civil war casualties, according to the 1999 report by the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH).

The death toll during this period, known as, “*la violencia*,” was over 200,000. In addition to the massacres, 35-40,000 people disappeared from their homes and villages, the highest number of disappearances in the Americas. For many Maya communities, torture, targeted killings, disappearances, and displacement became their daily experience. Those most affected by the conflict originated from Quiché, Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango, and Alta Verapaz regions. Other areas targeted by the State and the military were in Baja Verapaz, Solotá, San Marcos, Petén, and Izabal regions.

### **Humanitarian Conditions**

In 1996, the Guatemalan government and the rebel groups newly united as the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) signed a peace agreement. Prior to this agreement, in 1994, the two parties had signed a separate agreement guaranteeing the right of the internally displaced and refugees to return to their communities of origin or resettle in another area of their choosing. The agreement included specific provisions for resettlement, land compensation, and economic reintegration for all people displaced by the protracted war. Implementation of these provisions by the government has been extremely slow, however, leaving 250,000 internally displaced people without assistance to return home and rebuild their livelihoods.

There are two kinds of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Guatemala: those that are part of a collective community and those who remain dispersed and unorganized. During the conflict, both categories of displaced persons fled to less dangerous rural villages, urban centers, and the highlands.

A small, but significant Maya population of 50,000 fled to the forests and highlands of Petén and El Quiché. The government and military accused anyone hiding in the forests of being subversives and continued to attack them. The displaced resisted by forming Communities of Peoples in Resistance (CPRs), an information and protection network to monitor the army’s movement in the highlands. The nomadic life in the mountains was extremely dangerous, as people had to move frequently from one location to another to avoid military attacks. It was not until two years after the peace agreements in 1998 that the first CPR group came out of hiding. Many of them resettled on farms through the program agreed to by the Guatemalan government and the URNG.

During the conflict, a considerable number of people from rural communities flooded the capital, Guatemala City, and other regional urban centers. For the most part, the urban displaced did not belong to an organized community as in the highlands. The displaced in urban areas face political, economic, and racial discrimination on a daily basis, and find it especially difficult to access the labor market. Lack of Spanish skills and their social position bar them from obtaining regular employment. Those who were lucky enough to secure a job usually work in factories with exploitative conditions. Over 70 percent of women work in factories where human rights violations and gender-based discrimination occur regularly and often without penalty. Out of sheer necessity, some women work as domestic workers or in other informal employment, which is not regulated by the State.

Rather than considering their plight as part of the larger problem of displacement due to conflict, the Guatemalan government defines the urban displaced as economic migrants. The government is unwilling to recognize thousands of people as IDPs without personal identification documents stating proof of origin. Many in the community, particularly women, have lost these documents as the result of the constant displacement during the war.

Unlike the displaced that were members of the CPRs, unorganized IDPs have been unable to gain access to basic services. Moreover, they have been left out of the resettlement program, and have received no compensation for the loss or destruction of their homes and lands. The displaced from rural areas have been unable to secure legal land tenure, and land disputes persist between people displaced from their land and those who moved in to replace them during the course of the conflict and its aftermath.

Within two years of the signing of the peace accords, the Guatemalan government announced that their approach to assisting the displaced population would be to address their needs along with the rest of the landless population through a national development program for poverty alleviation. While a sound approach in theory, the result has been a neglect of the special needs of displaced persons, and an overall lack of justice and restitution for the displacement that they suffered during the violence. The government has provided no funding at all for the Trust Fund for Productive Projects, created to support economic projects for the displaced, and under-financed the Land Trust Fund, which was intended to purchase land. This lack of support has left hundreds of thousands of people without protection and assistance for return and reintegration.

Although the current government of Guatemala has repeatedly expressed its commitment to the 1996 peace agreements, the inadequate implementation of the peace process has contributed to continued violence and human insecurity in Guatemala. Past political and socio-economic inequalities remain unchanged, directly affecting the displaced and indigenous populations.

**Therefore, Refugees International recommends that:**

- The Government of Guatemala accelerate the implementation of the resettlement program, legalize land and property rights, and fulfill other commitments to the displaced made in the 1994 special agreement and the 1996 peace accords.
- The Government of Guatemala recognize the special needs and claims for restitution of the 250,000 remaining internally displaced and address their specific needs, rather than seeking to address them through global anti-poverty programs.
- International donor governments engage with the Guatemalan government to encourage the implementation of the agreements related to the displaced and provide special funding for programs for their resettlement and reintegration.

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*McCall-Pierpaoli Fellow Yodit Fitigu prepared this report.*