

GUATEMALA

Director of Guatemalan Newspaper Arrested Dozens of prosecutors and police officers raided the house of José Rubén Zamora, director of the Guatemalan newspaper *El Periodico*. The raid, carried out on July 29, extended to the newspaper's offices, as well as Zamora's home. Zamora was arrested after the raid. A prosecutor working with the Special Office of Crimes Against Impunity (FECI), Samari Gómez Díaz, was arrested on July 29, as well. The charges against them, [according](#) to the Public Ministry, are related to money laundering and leaking of information. The charges against Zamora also include blackmail and influence peddling. FECI head Rafael Curruchiche, who was recently placed on the State Department's [Engel List](#) of corrupt actors and who ordered the raids under the supervision of Attorney General Consuelo Porras, told reporters investigations are ongoing and may involve additional arrests.

Zamora and Gómez, whose arraignment process began on August 3, are being held in pretrial detention. Gómez [told](#) reporters that since former FECI head Juan Francisco Sandoval was arbitrarily dismissed last year, she has suffered increasing harassment. She has worked in the Public Ministry with a spotless record for 12 years.

[Zamora's son](#), José Carlos Zamora, [told](#) CNN that the raid was carried out disproportionately, by police officers armed with machine guns who made use of twenty patrol cars. Reporters Without Borders [describes](#) the raid as occurring when Zamora was at home with his family, including his grandchildren; passports of family members were taken by police, as were cell phones. The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Pedro Vaca, tweeted during the raids on the evening of July 29 that he was aware of the raids and had been trying to get in contact with Zamora without success. He said he understood people were being held incommunicado, and pointed out that Zamora and *El Periodico* had protective measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The Guatemalan government froze the bank accounts of *El Periodico* on August 1.

A prominent and esteemed journalist, Zamora founded *El Periodico*, a hard-hitting investigative newspaper, in 1996, after founding and working for years at what was one of Guatemala's major dailies, *Siglo Veintiuno*. His arrest was the subject of an [editorial](#) in the *Washington Post* and received coverage from [Agence France Press](#), [BBC](#), [NPR](#), the [New York Times](#), [CNN](#), [NBC](#), the [Washington Post](#), the [Wall Street Journal](#), [USA Today](#), and, among other outlets, [Investing.com](#).

Guatemala's powerful business alliance, the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations (CACIF), released a [statement](#) expressing concern about Zamora's arrest but within 24 hours [backpeddled](#), saying, "It is up to the Public Ministry, and only that institution, to, at the appropriate moment of the trial, reveal the background behind the accusations."

[Responding](#) to the arrests, Representative Jim McGovern tweeted, "The judiciary is already decimated. Is the free press next?" Representative Norma Torres [tweeted](#), "This represents another kick to democracy." Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols [tweeted](#), "Safeguarding press freedom is essential to democracy. The United States urges full respect of due process under Guatemalan law." He called for the

protection of the personal safety of Zamora and prosecutor Samari Gómez. Likewise, Peter Stano, spokesperson for the European Union, [tweeted](#) that Zamora's arrest "raises serious concern about press freedom" in Guatemala and called on the government to ensure due process and guarantee Zamora's and Gómez's safety. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres [stated](#) that he was concerned about the arrest of Zamora, as well as the legal action the government of Guatemala had taken against its own justice personnel. The Convergence for Human Rights, a coalition of several leading Guatemalan human rights organizations, in a [communique](#) denounced as arbitrary the actions of the Public Ministry, which, the Convergence said, "puts itself at the service of the Pact of the Corrupt." The Convergence for Human Rights demanded the release of José Rubén Zamora and Samari Gómez, demanded that their physical safety be respected, and demanded that spurious prosecution against dissident voices be brought to an end. The International Federation on Human Rights, together with the Guatemalan human rights group UDEFEGUA, provided [context](#), pointing out, "The two years of Alejandro Giammattei's administration have witnessed a worrisome erosion of democratic principles and institutions in Guatemala. The progressive dismantling of the independent judicial system has seriously damaged the rule of law and the separation of powers in the country. At the same time, the criminalization of independent journalists, human rights defenders, and indigenous organizations has contributed to the closure of civic space with systematic violations of the rights of assembly, association, and expression."

Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei [claimed](#) to have had no involvement in the arrest of Zamora. The Public Ministry in a [statement](#) argued that Zamora was arrested on suspicion of crimes unrelated to journalism, Gómez was arrested in connection with those possible crimes, and the arrests were carried out on the order of a judge. In the months prior to the capture of Zamora, *El Periodico* [reported](#) on a [scheme](#) in which construction companies illegally funded Giammattei's electoral campaign with advance payments made to the companies by the Guatemalan Ministry of Communications. *El Periodico* has also covered other cases of corruption involving high-level officials. Attacks on journalists, on the rise in Guatemala, have led at least five journalists since early 2021 to flee into exile.

IACHR Human Rights Report Classifies Guatemala with Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), in its 2021 human rights report released in May, classified Guatemala under a chapter reserved for states that are in serious violation of international human rights norms and agreements. Explaining the categorization, the IACHR pointed to "actions by the Guatemalan government that undermine judicial independence and call into question the fight against impunity and corruption, as well as . . . the progressive weakening of democratic institutions and the institutional framework for human rights."

The report refers to continuing acts of violence and proceedings to criminalize those who defend human rights in the country and the closure of democratic spaces, which makes it more difficult to exercise the right to defend human rights in Guatemala. According to the report, "[T]he crisis in the Guatemalan justice system is extremely troubling because such actions are apparently part of an intended co-optation strategy by parallel power groups and structures involved in corruption schemes and interested in ensuring impunity and perpetuating the means of corruption."

The IACHR observed "ongoing actions to dismantle the institutional framework to fight corruption, culminating in the dismissal of the head of the FECCI [Juan Francisco Sandoval] in apparent reprisal for the investigations he was leading that were said to involve high-level authorities of the Guatemalan State." The IACHR also states that it observed an intensification of efforts to criminalize and stigmatize magistrates, judges, and other independent operators of justice in the country, and the climate of judicial persecution and harassment has been possible due

to the manipulation of criminal law and the alleged lack of independence of the Office of the Public Prosecutor and its Attorney General.

The weakening of the Constitutional Court is a concern noted in the report. The Court “had in recent years stood out for its work in defense of human rights, democratic institutions, and the principles that govern the democratic system in keeping with the country’s Constitution. . . . As a consequence, the IACHR has been receiving information for several years concerning attacks on and interference with the independence of the Constitutional Court, and these incidents intensified in 2021 Finally, in 2021, the IACHR was extremely concerned to observe that the selection of judges to the Supreme Court and the Courts of Appeals for the 2019-2024 period, which should have taken place in 2019, continues to be delayed by Congress. As of the closing date of this report, the current justices of the Supreme Court remain in office indefinitely, even though their mandates came to an end in 2019, which compromises the independence of the justice system in Guatemala.”

The IACHR also warns of the progressive weakening of human rights institutions and serious risk to the work of journalism, as well as to the defense of human rights, as a result of continuing acts of violence and cases of criminalization and judicial persecution.

Giammattei, in response to the inclusion of Guatemala under Chapter IV.B, traveled to Washington, where he [met](#) with the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States to protest the IACHR’s report. He also gave [interviews](#) attributing Guatemala’s categorization under IV.B to the country’s classification of abortion as a crime and he attended the International Religious Freedom Summit, where he proclaimed Guatemala the “pro-life capital of Latin America.” Additionally, he met with Homeland Security Director Alejandro Mayorkas. According to [press reports](#), Giammattei said he and Mayorkas designed a road map that, as Giammattei put it, “will permit us to count on the most recent technology to identify persons with biometric controls and determine, for example, if they are being sought.”

Attorney General Fires Eight More Prosecutors In spite of the government’s discomfort with the findings of the IACHR report, the Guatemalan government in July [continued](#) its pattern of weakening its prosecutorial and investigative capacities; Attorney General Consuelo Porrás, on the Engel List for obstructing investigations, [arbitrarily dismissed](#) 8 career prosecutors and 11 other employees of the Public Prosecutor's Office. Among the dismissed prosecutors are Hilda Pineda, Wendy Ordóñez, Sara Romero, Eleonora Castillo, Elka Huitz, and Sara Sandoval, who investigated emblematic cases of serious human rights violations and major corruption. Multiple [international human rights organizations](#) noted that the required prior disciplinary procedure and the required proof that serious misconduct has been committed were steps the Attorney General’s Office omitted.

Judge Gálvez, Under Increasing Threat, Receives Protective Orders from the IAC

Judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez, who presides over Guatemala’s High Risk Court B, is under increasing threat after indicting former military and police officers for war crimes in the Death Squad Dossier (Diario Militar) case. The Supreme Court is required to respond to security issues facing judges but has failed to respond to Gálvez’ report of threats. The threats have escalated in recent months. Judge Gálvez reports being followed by unidentified men in a car without license plates. Vehicles without license plates were notoriously used by death squads during the years of the armed conflict.

On July 8, the Inter-American Court [ordered](#) Guatemala to adopt [urgent measures](#) to protect the physical safety of Judge Gálvez and his family; to guarantee his ability to perform his judicial duties free of external pressure; and to ensure the right to justice for the victims in the case. On May 6, Judge Gálvez had indicted retired military and police officers Marco Antonio

González Taracena, Víctor Augusto Vásquez Echeverría, Gustavo Adolfo Oliva Blanco, Juan Francisco Cifuentes Cano, José Daniel Monterroso Villagrán, Enrique Cifuentes de la Cruz, Rone René Lara, and Edgar Corado Samayoa. The men are accused of illegal detention, torture, forced disappearance, homicide and sexual violence, crimes involving at least 195 victims. Judge Gálvez is also facing judicial persecution from an organization notorious for filing malicious lawsuits, the so-called Foundation Against Terrorism, whose director, Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, was placed on [last year's Engel List](#).

State Department Adds New FECCI Head to Engel List In June 2022, the US State Department released its annual [Engel List](#), a congressionally mandated report on corrupt individuals in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. In the State Department's judgment, José Rafael Curruchiche, the current chief of the Public Ministry's Office of the Special Prosecutor Against Impunity (FECCI), "obstructed investigations into acts of corruption by disrupting high-profile corruption cases against government officials and raising apparently spurious claims against FECCI prosecutors, private attorneys, and former International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) prosecutors." Current Attorney General Consuelo Porras, [reappointed](#) by President Giammattei in May, was placed on the list last summer and this year in May was designated under Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, making her and her immediate family members ineligible for entry into the United States.

Another addition to the Engel List in 2022 is José Luis Benito Ruiz, who was Guatemala's Minister of Communications and Infrastructure from 2018-2020. According to the State Department, Benito Ruiz "engaged in significant corruption when he solicited, accepted, and offered bribes in order to maintain his official position and receive kickbacks from contractors, and facilitated the transfer of proceeds of corruption." This inclusion is significant; it signals that the US government considers the accusations against Giammattei regarding illegal campaign financing to be credible, for it is Ruiz who is accused of arranging the [deal](#) with construction companies for the campaign donations, i.e., the "proceeds of corruption."

Students Protesting New University Rector Threatened, Followed, Intimidated On June 2, Leslie Vásquez, a University of San Carlos (USAC) student who opposed the candidacy of Walter Mazariegos for rector of the university, [was pursued](#) while driving by men in a truck. The incident occurred in Zone 8 of Guatemala City. The driver of the truck hit her side-mounted review mirror and as she tried to turn into a gas station blocked her way. The passengers in the car insulted her as she was blocked in and the driver reached into her vehicle and tugged on the passenger side visor, all while insulting her. Then he tried to get out his truck. She managed to pull her car away, and she fled and was again pursued by the truck. Two other students who had worked against the candidacy of Mazariegos reported similar incidents. Mazariegos was installed after groups of voters who opposed him [were blocked](#) from entering the voting area by National Civil Police officers and unidentified, hooded men.

Human Rights Ombudsman Jordán Rodas condemned the attack and called for an investigation by the Public Ministry, tweeting, "I condemn this cowardly intimidation against Leslie Vásquez, student representative of the opposition to Walter Mazariegos, [Vásquez] is being subjected to persecution for her clear position regarding the USAC fraud."

Seven electoral bodies representing various university departments were disqualified from voting in a meeting prior to the election, leading to widespread [claims of fraud](#), including by the other candidates, Jordán Rodas and Carlos Valladares. Student protests and occupations of university buildings have been [ongoing](#) since the May 14 election, and [students joined](#) a national strike on August 9.

New Human Rights Ombudsman to Take Office on August 20 Human Rights Ombudsman Jordán Rodas has begun the transfer of duties to incoming ombudsman José Alejandro Córdova Herrera, [elected by Congress](#) on July 20. He will be Human Rights Ombudsman for the next five years. Civil society organizations in Guatemala have [raised concerns](#) about his credentials and background. Under Juan Francisco Sandoval's direction, the Special Prosecutor's Office against Impunity (FECI) accused Córdova of having had contact with prisoner [Gustavo Alejos](#), one of the most influential political operators in the [shady nomination process](#) for the country's courts.

More information on Guatemala and PBI's work in Guatemala can be found [here](#).

HONDURAS

David Castillo, a Convicted Planner of Berta Cáceres' Murder, Sentenced to 22.6 Years

On June 20, after many delays following his July 2021 [conviction](#), David Castillo was sentenced for participating in the assassination of indigenous and human rights leader Berta Cáceres in 2016. The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), the group founded and led by Cáceres, called for further prosecutions and named members of the Atala family as additional intellectual authors of the crime. "Investigations by international experts have shown that there is an intellectual authorship in the assassination of Berta Cáceres. This intellectual authorship is comprised of the brothers Jacobo, José Eduardo, Pedro Atala Zablah, and Daniel Atala Midence," COPINH said in a [statement](#) responding to the sentencing. "So far, the Public Prosecutor's Office, led by Óscar Chinchilla and specifically the Prosecutor's Office for Crimes Against Life, have not made any real progress in clarifying the intellectual authorship of this case. We demand that the duty of the Public Prosecutor's Office to prosecute the intellectual authors be fulfilled."

Trial in Gualcarque River Fraud Case Begins An [ongoing case](#) in which David Castillo is named as a defendant is the [Gualcarque fraud](#) case, which [went to trial](#) on July 25. Castillo and five others have been formally charged with fraudulently obtaining concessions and permits to install the Agua Zarca dam on the Gualcarque River. Charges include falsification of documents, abuse of authority, violation of the duties of a public official, and fraud to benefit the Atala Zablah family. On August 3, Roberto Abate Ponce testified. He was a driver/employee of the company DIGICOM, which was owned by David Castillo. As Karen Spring summarizes, in a blog called [Honduras Now](#), "Ponce testified that Castillo used his name, without permission, to create the company DESA. Later, the Atalas would become shareholders. At the time, Castillo was a public official inside the National Electrical Energy Company (ENEE) and had inside information and access to officials that could approve an energy contract for DESA (hence him hiding his involvement with DESA)."

COPINH Sues Dutch Development Bank On June 28, COPINH [filed a lawsuit](#) against the Dutch bank FMO and its directors for complicity in corruption, embezzlement, money laundering, and violence in the development of the [Agua Zarca](#) dam project of the Atala Zablah family. The [criminal accusation](#) is against the legal entity of the bank FMO (Nederlandse Financierings-Maatschappij voor Ontwikkelingslanden N.V.), which the Dutch government owns 51 percent of, and against its main executives; Nanno Kleiterp, honorary president of the European Development Finance Institutions (EDFI); Jurgen Rigterink, current first vice president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); and Linda Broekhuizen, former interim executive director of the FMO, among other executives. This action is in addition to the civil lawsuit action that COPINH filed in May 2018 against FMO for its negligent action in the handling of its financing to the Agua Zarca project that led to violence

against the Lenca community of Rio Blanco and COPINH, resulting in the murder of community members and Berta Cáceres.

PBI Honduras Outlines Progress and Challenges in Xiomara Castro's First Hundred Days

In a [report](#) on the first hundred days of Xiomara Castro's administration, PBI's Honduras Project notes some positive steps forward and makes recommendations to the international community. Some of the positive steps cited include the repeal of the Law of Secrets in March, which had been a serious obstacle to the work of journalists and the fight against corruption. The government's February declaration of a ban on open-pit mining is another positive step; the government said it would review, suspend, and cancel the environmental licenses of existing mining projects. The lack of an executive decree, however, leaves the initiative without the official support of the executive branch and with little clarity on when and how the decision will be applied. PBI Honduras is concerned that often the free, prior, and informed consultation mandated by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization is not carried out. The unanimous decree in April by the Honduran Congress repealing the Zones for Employment and Economic Development ([ZEDEs](#)) is an additional step forward cited by PBI's Honduras Project. These zones, originally conceived of in 2009, consist of areas of Honduran territory where investors control tax, security, and conflict-resolution policies.

Other positive measures include the demilitarization of Honduran penitentiaries, by order President Castro in March 2022, with a projected deadline of ten months to transfer control of the prisons and the National Penitentiary Institute to the National Police. Rural areas may also see a reduction in military influence, following the Constitutional Court's April 2022 resolution declaring Executive Decree PCM 052- 2019 unconstitutional. The decree assigned the management of an agricultural development program and its billion-lempira budget to the Armed Forces. At the same time, however, the Honduran Congress approved a budget of nearly ten billion lempiras (over \$350 million) to Honduras' Department of Defense. This represents an increase over its budget in 2021. Between 2008 and 2020, the budget allocated to the defense sector increased by 400 percent. Human rights violations carried out by the security forces have provoked international outcry and led to investigations by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Recommendations for the international community outlined in the report include insuring compliance with international principles during the election of high-ranking public officials to the Supreme Court, the High Court of Auditors, and to the position of Attorney General of Honduras. In November 2022, nine judges will be appointed to the Supreme Court of Justice. This decision will have lasting impacts on Honduran legislation. Other recommendations include supporting the process to eliminate the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP). Since the coup d'état, supposedly temporary measures, such as the imposition of the PMOP, have become lasting features in successive national security policies. In order to advance the demilitarization of Honduran society, it is necessary to revise the mandates of special security bodies, including the PMOP, and develop procedures for their elimination. PBI Honduras also encourages the international community to call for the prosecution for human rights violations committed by state security forces and prosecution of violations of the right to free, prior, and informed [consultation](#) guaranteed by Convention 169 International Labor Organization. Many other recommendations and observations are made in the report, which includes sections on women's rights (and notes that, with a femicide rate of 6.2 killings per 100,000 women, Honduras is the most dangerous country in Latin America for women) and LGBTQ rights. See the full report on the Castro administration's first hundred days [here](#).

Head of USDFC Travels to Honduras to Discuss Energy Investment On July 7, Scott Nathan, head of the US Development Finance Corporation, [visited](#) Honduras to discuss investment in biomass, solar energy, and measures to strengthen the agricultural sector through energy projects. He met with Secretary of Energy Erick Tejada, as well as with other government and private sector representatives.

The visit occurred in spite of public disagreement between the United States and Honduras over reforms to its energy law, passed in May, which—as the State Department’s 2022 Investment Climate Statement puts it—has “dramatically increased the uncertainty of investment returns. Chief among these,” the [statement](#) continues, “was the May 2022 approval of a new energy law that threatens power generators with forced sale at a ‘just price’ if they do not reduce their tariffs to the government’s satisfaction.” Before the law was approved, US Ambassador to Honduras Laura Dogu tweeted (in Spanish), “Energy reform is critical for economic development. We are analyzing the energy bill and as written we are concerned about the effect it will have on foreign investment and the independence of the regulating agency.” Honduras Secretary of Foreign Relations, Enrique Reina tweeted back, “Madam Ambassador, you have been welcomed with open arms. Energy reform is urgent as a State, it combats an inherited situation of corruption and poverty. We are concerned about your misguided opinion on domestic politics, which does not contribute to good relations with the US.”

In August, several members of Congress [visited](#) Honduras to discuss investment opportunities, visiting textile and apparel facilities in an industrial park in Choloma on August 5. According to [reports](#), they “witnessed first-hand the significant investments, expansions, and job creation in the country’s textile and apparel sector and the USA fibers and yarns utilized in the production process.” The delegation, led by Congressman Lou Correa (D-CA), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight, Management and Accountability, toured several companies with facilities in Honduras, including Parkdale Mills, Elcatex, and SanMar, all of which are expanding their footprint in the region. Reps. John Katko (R-NY), ranking member of the House Homeland Security Committee, and Tony Gonzales (R-TX) also joined the delegation, which included Ambassador Dogu and US and Honduran industry executives. These new investments in the industrial park were recently highlighted by Vice President Kamala Harris, who has called on private industry to promote economic opportunity in the region to address the root causes of migration. The congressional delegation, which also included by Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) and Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA), [visited](#) El Salvador and Guatemala, as well, where they discussed cracking down on transnational criminal groups; boosting response to migrant smuggling and human trafficking; addressing poverty and migration; and strengthening US ports of entry.

Prominent Educator and Labor Leader Murdered Teacher and labor leader Edward Iván Cáceres Salgado [was murdered](#) in his house in El Bálsamo, Yoro, on July 3. He taught at the Esteban Moya Institute and at the Pilar M. Martínez Basic Education Center in the municipality of El Progreso, Yoro. He was Secretary of Cultural and Professional Affairs for the Central Board of Directors of the College of Mid-Level Teachers of Honduras. He was also a member of the Popular Resistance Front of the Libertad y Refoundation Party (LIBRE). “Everything must be considered, we are not discarding anything at this time,” former president of COPEMH, Fidel Garcia, told reporters, “even the fight against corruption within COPEMH must be investigated, because there may be connections.” He said, “[A] crime like this is not acceptable, a cowardly act, murdered in his own home, regardless of the cause, it is not acceptable, we must get to the bottom of this and we must find those who ordered it and those who pulled the trigger.” He added that “from the teachers union we have lived through terrible times, we have been living through terrible times as a country and we have believed that it has passed a little, but we see that things are not stopping, the social conflict continues and is overflowing.”

Nineteen Members of LGBTQ Community Murdered in First Six Months of Year

Between January and June 2022, according to a [statement](#) issued by PBI Honduras and Front Line Defenders, 19 members of the LGBTQ+ community in Honduras have been murdered. On May 14, two human rights defenders and members of the Colectiva de Mujeres Trans Muñecas, Rixy García and Rixie Madrid, suffered an attempted transfemicide by an unknown man. The attack occurred in Tegucigalpa. Rixy García suffered fractures to her jaw and Rixie Madrid was stabbed in the stomach with a screwdriver. During their emergency hospitalization, they reported being treated in a discriminatory and transphobic manner by health staff. The attack took place a week after the collective carried out several activities organized by members of SOMOS CDC and the organization Arcoiris on the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. Despite the seriousness of her injuries, Rixy García's necessary surgery was significantly delayed.

On May 16, Lucía Barrientos, coordinator of the Comité de la Diversidad Sexual y Grupo de Mujeres Lesbianas, Bisexuales y Trans IXCHEL, received anonymous threatening phone calls and intimidation while she was in Tegucigalpa. The threats occurred prior to the May 17 LGTBI+ rights march. On June 5, the LGBTQ+ rights defender Brayan Josué López Guzmán, a member of the organization Comunidad Gay Sampedrana para la Salud Integral and a collaborator of the Colectivo Unidad Color Rosa, was killed in San Pedro Sula. In light of this new hate crime, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras (OHCHR) called for “a prompt, impartial, and thorough investigation that considers all avenues of motives, including the possibility of a hate crime because of his sexual orientation or a reprisal for his human rights advocacy.” On June 8, Ameliana Zerón, a trans woman and member of SOMOS CDC, was assaulted while travelling on a bus and had her wallet and mobile phone stolen. She was the only person on the bus who was assaulted.

The LGBTQ+ community in Honduras is one of the most attacked in all of Central America. In recent years, nearly 50 percent of all crimes committed against LGBTQ+ persons in Central America occurred in Honduras. Representatives Joaquin Castro, David Cecilline, and Albio Sires led 27 members of Congress in a [letter](#) urging the State Department and the US Agency for International Development to strengthen their commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ individuals in Latin America, including refugees and asylum seekers.

The Honduran government is required to comply with a 2021 [ruling](#) by the Inter-American Court requiring the implementation of a gender identity law and the collection of disaggregated data on violence against LGBTQ+ persons. President Castro has [committed](#) to creating a legal gender recognition procedure in Honduras that will allow transgender people to modify their legal documents to reflect their gender identity. She also agreed to comply with [other aspects](#) of the court's ruling, including implementing LGBTQ+ awareness trainings for security forces, as well as a protocol for criminal investigations in these cases, and improving data collection in cases motivated by anti-LGBTQ+ bias.

OHCHR Calls for the Strengthening of the National Protection System In a July 29 [statement](#), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras (OHCHR) called on civil society organizations and Honduran government agencies to hold a dialogue that would contribute to strengthening the National Protection System. Honduras is one of the five countries in the Americas region that has a Protection Mechanism for human rights defenders and journalists, created in 2015 under the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators, and Justice Operators. The OHCHR, while acknowledging that the existence of the mechanism is an important advance, said it was “still necessary to deepen efforts to generate an enabling environment for the defense of human rights and the exercise of freedom of expression.” By July 29, the OHCHR had recorded 66 violent incidents in 2022 against at least 82 human rights defenders and 24 journalists. This violence includes 10 murders, according to the OHCHR, 8 of human rights defenders and 2 of journalists. This number reflects an escalation compared to last year, when throughout the entire course of

the year, 11 defenders were murdered. Human rights defenders who served on the board of the mechanism recently have withdrawn from participation to [protest](#) what they view as the illegal naming of a new director.

Government Agrees to Negotiations to Resolve Land Conflicts in Bajo Aguan In late July, the Honduran government [committed to](#) the formation of a tripartite commission to dialogue and find solutions to land conflicts in the Bajo Aguan region of Honduras. The commission will be made up of the United Nations High Commissioner’s Office, a committee of victims of land conflicts, and Honduran government representatives. The government reportedly will deal with issues of criminalization and persecution of campesinos seeking to reclaim land and will address ongoing evictions and investigations and reparations related to the more than 132 assassinations of campesinos in the region. The representative of the victims, Victor Fernández, pointed out that agroindustrial companies converted for their use large estates with more than 24,711 acres of land that were obtained through fraudulent sales and purchases, thus failing to comply with the provisions of the agrarian reform and the Constitution of the Republic.

Visit PBI Honduras’ [website](#) to learn more about the human rights situation in Honduras.

MEXICO

Global Index Places Mexico Fourth, Honduras Tenth in List of Most Corrupt The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime in its 2021 [index](#) has ranked Mexico and Honduras among the top ten most corrupt countries in the world. Guatemala is [ranked](#) 23rd, between Brazil and Sudan. The [Global Initiative](#), which receives funding from the US and EU, reflects in its analysis various positions that echo the US government’s observations and is at times prone to understatement, as in its contention that “a militarized, strong-arm approach to tackling organized crime has produced mixed results.” (In fact, this militarized approach, which has led to flagrant human rights violations and an increase in homicides, has been “[catastrophic](#),” as the Washington Office on Latin America points out.) In its analysis of civil society and social protections in Mexico, the Global Initiative is unsparing: “Hundreds of active nonprofit organizations were hit by the corruption crusade of the president, which froze federal funding on accusations of corruption and abuse. The media are seen as a threat and maligned by the administration, green-lighting long-standing violence against the media and making Mexico one of the deadliest countries for journalists. Civil-society leaders are regularly threatened and journalists covering sensitive stories are threatened, abducted, flee abroad or are gunned down in cold blood.”

Thirteenth Journalist Assassinated in 2022 as Attacks on Press Escalate Ernesto Méndez, director of the digital media *Tu voz*, which covers politics and violence in Guanajuato, [was shot to death](#) on August 2 by several men who entered a bar his family owned and opened fire. Three other people in the bar were also killed. Méndez had received threats in the past for his reporting. His murder marks the thirteenth killing of a journalist in Mexico to date this year, a figure which puts Mexico ahead of all other countries, including Ukraine, in terms of [lethality](#) for journalists.

On the morning of June 29, journalist Antonio de la Cruz was shot to death by unidentified assailants in Ciudad Victoria, the capital of the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, as he was leaving his house in his car with his 23-year-old daughter, who was seriously injured. De la Cruz worked for *Expreso*, local newspaper where he had been employed as a journalist for nearly three decades. De la Cruz covered the environment and agriculture for *Expreso* and did not report on crime, security, or politics, according to a source [cited](#) by the Committee to Protect Journalists. He did post information critical of the governor of Tamaulipas and of municipal

authorities on his widely followed Twitter account. While de la Cruz had not reported threats, *Expreso* has been subject to intimidation. In 2018, [a human head was left in an icebox outside Expreso's offices](#), accompanied by a message threatening local journalists. In 2012, [a car bomb exploded near the offices of the newspaper](#). De la Cruz was the twelfth journalist murdered in 2022, an alarming escalation in violence compared with 2021, when during a span of twelve months seven journalists were murdered. Since President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office three years ago, 37 journalists have been murdered and [attacks on the press](#) have risen by 85 percent.

Mexican civil society organizations have presented [guidelines](#) for a public policy to protect journalists and human rights defenders. The guidelines include ensuring full compliance with the 104 recommendations issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico to strengthen the [Protection Mechanism](#), and transparent reporting on the progress made in the implementation of these recommendations.

Representatives Jesús “Chuy” García (IL-04), Joaquin Castro (TX-20), and Raúl M. Grijalva (AZ-03) [led two letters](#) in June urging the State Department, the Justice Department, and the US Agency for International Development to work with the Mexican government to address rising levels of violence in Mexico. [One letter](#) addressed the killings of journalists and the other concerned [disappearances](#).

Two Priests Murdered in the Sierra Tarahumara On June 20, Jesuit priests Joaquín César Mora and Javier Campos, human rights defenders of the Rarámuri, Ódami, and mestizo communities, were killed in the community of Cerocahui, in Urique, a municipality in the Sierra Tarahumara, Chihuahua. The priests were shot to death in the community's church, as they were trying to help Mr. Pedro Palma, a tour guide in the region, who [reportedly](#) was herded into the church by a gunman who shot and killed him, then turned his gun on the priests. Both priests were widely recognized as long-time defenders of the indigenous peoples of the area. A local crime boss affiliated with the Sinaloa cartel, Jose Noriel Portillo Gil, believed to be responsible for the murder, has not been apprehended. At least 34 Catholic priests have been murdered in Mexico since 2012, 7 of whom were killed during Andrés Manuel López Obrador's term, which began in December 2018.

In an August 4 [letter](#) to President Biden, led by Representative Jim McGovern and Representative Anna Eshoo and signed by 20 other members of Congress, lawmakers urged the Biden administration to work closely with the Mexican government to ensure justice for these killings and to implement policies to end the crisis of violence in Mexico.

Violence is a constant in the Sierra Tarahumara, where organized crime rings push indigenous communities off their lands in order to plant poppies for opium or illegally fell forests for timber. Hundreds of indigenous families have been forcibly displaced from their land in the region as part of a growing displacement crisis in Mexico due to violent dispossession at the hands of organized crime.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Calls on Mexico to Act on Disappearances

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on Mexico to take action against disappearances, which, according to Mexico's national registry, now number more than 100,000. Disappearances have been recorded in the national registry since 1964. More than 97 percent of 100,000 disappearances listed occurred after December 2006, when Mexico transitioned to a militarized public security model, according to a [statement](#) from the UN High Commissioner's Office. A fifth of those listed as disappeared are minors, and a fourth are women. In only 35 cases have the perpetrators been convicted.

Bachelet in her May 17 [statement](#) said Mexico had taken meaningful steps, including the approval of the General Law on Disappearances and the creation of search commissions in all states. Commissions to examine serious human rights violations that occurred between 1965 and 1990, as well as the enforced disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students in 2014, were other

steps she mentioned, along with the Extraordinary Forensic Identification Mechanism. In June 2021, in a landmark decision, the Supreme Court recognized the binding nature of the Urgent Actions of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED). In November 2021, Mexico became the first country to accept a visit of the CED, which visited 13 states, attending more than 150 meetings with authorities, victims' organizations, and civil society organizations. Bachelet called on the authorities to put the families of missing persons at the center of their efforts and to make available the necessary resources for effective investigations and searches. Bachelet also urged Mexico to implement all the recommendations of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances and all aspects of the General Law on Disappearances, including the creation of the National Forensic Data Bank and the National Program for Exhumations and Forensic Identification. Bachelet's remarks followed the adoption of the CED's [report](#).

President Will Place National Guard under Control of the Army On August 8, President López Obrador [announced that he would issue an agreement](#) to place the National Guard under the control of the Armed Forces. When the president created the National Guard in 2019, it was established in the constitution as an explicitly civil entity. Human rights [advocates](#) and analysts [feared](#) the National Guard represented yet another militarized approach to security issues, one that would endanger the civilian population and lead to numerous human rights violations. These fears have been [borne out repeatedly](#) over the past three years.

The National Guard, which began with 70,000 elements, now has 114,000 troops and at least 260 barracks. The president justified his intention to place the National Guard under the Secretariat of Defense with the argument of avoiding corruption, preventing the political management of the security corps, and guaranteeing the National Guard's permanence. His announcement removes control of the National Guard from the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection.

Congressional Human Rights Commission Holds Hearing on Rights Violations in Mexico

On June 23, the [Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission](#) held a [hearing](#) on human rights violations in Mexico, the first such hearing in ten years. Witnesses spoke of the country's failed security policies, expanded militarization, blurred lines between the government/armed forces and criminals, and the absence of a truly independent prosecutor's office. The country's attorney general's actions were criticized and concern was expressed about the possibility that the National Guard would be placed formally under control of the Army. The insufficiency of the Protection Mechanism and the abuses migrants are subject to by Mexico's Armed Forces, which has a as purported goal to "[stop all migration](#)," were other concerns raised by witnesses.

Stephanie Brewer, of the Washington Office on Latin America, [stated](#), "We urge Congress to exercise its oversight capabilities to assess the effectiveness of US assistance to Mexico, ensuring that the stark lessons of the Merida Initiative lead to evidence-based improvements within the new Bicentennial Framework that will truly increase the population's safety and access to justice." Recommendations from the Latin America Working Group and more testimony is [here](#).

More information on PBI's work in Mexico is [here](#).

[Peace Brigades International](#) is a nongovernmental organization that sends teams of international observers to areas of conflict and repression to provide protective accompaniment to human rights defenders whose lives and work are under threat. Founded in 1981 with its first project in Guatemala, PBI has worked in fourteen countries and on four continents and has consultative status before the UN. PBI's international office in Brussels and advocacy staff in Geneva and around the world support efforts in the field to open space for peace and for the defense of human rights.