



Peace Brigades International

Guatemala Honduras Mexico Update

May 27, 2020

GUATEMALA

The Guatemalan Congress has approved the third extension of the State of Prevention, in effect until June 5, until which time restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of association remain in force. Any demonstrations, as well as meetings of more than three people, are prohibited. The PBI projects issued a communique expressing deep concern about the effects the pandemic is having on the exercise of human rights. Restrictions to movement, in particular, are hindering the work of human rights defenders. Government agencies responsible for protecting human rights are affected by the health crises, as well, since human rights personnel lack the protective equipment to go into the field to monitor situations. Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [said](#) her office by the end of April had received reports of 11,000 arrests or detentions in Guatemala in response to “heavy enforcement of quarantine measures.” With the prohibitions on protest, the closure of the courts, and the suspension of dialogue platforms, violence and human rights violations in recent weeks have increased.

Right to Justice Under Peace Accords Threatened

In the context of the pandemic, the Guatemala government has moved to close down an agency pivotal to the implementation of the Peace Accords, prompting survivors of crimes against humanity to appeal.

- **Survivors of Crimes Against Humanity File Appeal Against Closure of SEPAZ** In response to the Guatemalan Government’s efforts to close of the Secretariat of Peace (SEPAZ), [announced](#) on April 1, survivors of grave violations by state forces during Guatemala’s internal armed conflict on April 23 presented an appeal to Guatemala’s Constitutional Court. The Secretariat of Peace (SEPAZ) was created to fulfill the terms of the Guatemalan peace accords, signed in 1996. Closing SEPAZ essentially paralyzes the National Reparations Program (PNR) and other institutions formed as part of the Peace Accords, survivors said in a [communique](#). “The Peace Accords and the Law of National Reconciliation recognize our rights to the truth, to justice, to reparations and to guarantees of non-repetition and sustain the functioning of SEPAZ. Therefore,” they stated, “we are taking legal action against the decision to close this institution definitively. This violates the Framework Accord of the Peace Accords and is an attack on the National Council for the Fulfillment of the Peace Accords (CNAP). This decision also puts at risk the continued functioning of the National Reparations Plan (PNR) since it would transfer its functions to the Presidential Human Rights Commission (COPREDEH), which has neither the technical nor financial capacity to administer the PNR.” They asked, too, that the files and documentation of the PNR be conserved, since they contain thousands of testimonies of grave human rights violations.

According to a 2019 [report](#) by Impunity Watch, since the PNR was formed in 2003, the Government of Guatemala has provided reparations to 33,094 survivors and relatives of victims, out of a total of 200,000 victims who were killed or disappeared, as established in the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) report. “This represents barely 16 percent,” Impunity Watch notes. . . . Also, the PNR does not have specific programs for genocide victims, even though the CEH report established that acts of genocide were committed in four

indigenous regions of the country, and two Guatemalan courts have determined that the State committed genocide against the Ixil people.”

As the Guatemala Human Rights Commission [points out](#), President Alejandro Giammattei “comes to the presidency backed by a group of hardline former military officers reportedly associated with the sector that opposed the peace process that ended Guatemala’s 36-year civil war. . . . Guatemalan press reported that, when asked if the appointment of former military officers to public security positions was a violation of the 1996 Peace Accords, Giammattei replied, ‘What peace accords?’”

Other agencies created by the Peace Accords are also under threat. The Guatemalan government has announced the closing of the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs, created to ensure compliance with the agrarian and rural development aspects of the Peace Accords. A [bill](#) before the Guatemalan Congress [would begin](#) the process of dissolving the president’s security force, currently civilian, and possibly replace it with military security, as in the years of the war, which would violate the Peace Accords.

The Peace Accords, if implemented [as planned](#), would have addressed some of the long-standing, structural inequalities that have left 62 percent of Guatemala’s population in poverty, with a rural child [malnutrition rate](#) of around 80 percent. As it stands, COVID-19 is dramatically worsening an already bad situation. For large parts of the population, the economic situation is increasingly dire. Seventy percent of Guatemalans work in the informal sector, as domestic workers and sellers of wares, and this sector is largely paralyzed by government measures to contain the virus. Remittances from the United States have fallen, contributing to even more hardship. Those individuals and families who no longer have food can put a white flag in their window or in front of their house to signal for help. In Guatemala City, according to reports from human rights workers, there are entire streets with white flags. The state response to this need has been minimal, according to reports, and individuals, private groups, and NGOs have stepped in to provide food to people in dire need. Chronic malnutrition among children under five [has tripled](#) since this time last year, and the food crisis is expected to worsen as the rainy season begins. The price of basic sustenance items continues to increase, especially in remote communities where abusive merchants can name their price, since limited public transportation prevents people from accessing municipal markets. Many human rights defenders have pointed out that in communities and rural areas, food and humanitarian aid is being distributed by mayors or community councils who only provide the food and aid to people they have identified as political supporters. Human rights defenders themselves, if they have denounced the actions of local officials, are often discriminated against in the distribution of aid.

Large-Scale Industries Continue Operating Illegally Amid Shutdown

Mining and hydroelectric projects—even those ordered by courts to suspend their operations—have continued without impediment through the shutdown. Throughout the country, and even in the dry corridor of eastern Guatemala, an area where malnutrition is increasingly pressing yet people are prevented by curfew from doing a full day’s work, mines that local communities have opposed continue to operate and controversial hydroelectric dams continue to be built, in the absence of people’s ability to protest.

- **Work at a Chiquimula Mine Continues in Spite of Appeals Court Injunction** The Ch’orti’ Indigenous Council of Olopa in a letter on April 27 to the municipality of Olopa [denounced](#) the work being carried out on land belonging to the Cantera Los Manantiales mine,

located in the Maya Ch'orti' communities in Olopa, Chiquimula. The council also denounced the harassment of indigenous leaders by people linked to the mine. A provisional injunction was granted last November which suspends the mining license that had been authorized by the Ministry of Energy and Mines. While mining company workers continue work at the mine and even work on the highway leading to the mine is carried out—defying government restrictions imposed to combat the spread of the Corona virus—indigenous authorities are harassed by people watching their houses at curfew time to ensure they are inside, the Council said. The Mayan community authorities asked the municipal mayor, the National Police, and the Human Rights Ombudsman to suspend and sanction road work activities carried out by the Community Development Council (COCODE) of Carrizal, that they be present at the mine to identify the harms that have been done, and that they stop any kind of work that is being carried out, given that the injunction forbids this work.

- **Solway Nickel Mine Continues Operations in Spite of Injunction** The Russian-Swiss company Solway has also [continued operations](#) at the processing plant for its open-pit nickel mine on Lake Izabal. Last year, Guatemala's Constitutional Court ordered a provisional suspension of the mine, given the company's failure to consult area residents prior to expanding its area of operations.

Illegal Evictions Leave Vulnerable Families Homeless

Also continuing, in spite of the shutdown, are violent evictions of communities from disputed land.

- On April 3, the community known as Washington, in Purulhá, Baja Verapaz, went out to work in their fields and encountered gunfire. The following day, their houses were fired on. On April 5, some 20 armed men dressed in military clothing (though not members of the Guatemalan armed forces) violently and illegally evicted the Mayan Poqomchi communities of Washington and Dos Fuentes. The two communities are members of the [Campesino Committee of the Highlands \(CCDA\)](#), an organization accompanied by PBI. The evictions—carried out by private security guards—took place without adequate prior notice and without any offer of alternative housing for the 36 affected families, putting their lives and safety at risk. The [families](#) were not able to take anything with them, and their houses were burned. The communities' crops were also destroyed. Officials from the Public Ministry did not manage to mobilize to investigate the situation until two weeks later.
- On the morning of April 13, 200 families from the “Tierra Blanca Calle Principal” farm in the Tierra Blanca microregion of Sayaxché, Petén, were victims of an [attempted eviction](#) by the [Chiquibul Industry, Inc.](#), a palm oil company. The eviction attempt was carried out by the company's private security guards, who used live ammunition against the community, injuring Izáis Tiul Pop, a 30-year-old community member. The [attack](#) occurred within the context of an occupation of the company's land by former workers who are demanding pay and benefits and who have received no favorable response.

Human Rights Defenders Attacked, Killed

Attacks on human rights defenders have proliferated in recent weeks, despite restrictions on movement.

- Human Rights Defender Murdered** On the afternoon of April 26, María Fernanda Pérez, auxiliary mayor of the community of Nueva Florida, in Colomba, Quetzaltenango was murdered as she was returning home. A human rights defender and medical student, she was 29 years old and was active in ensuring the participation of youth and women in community decisions. The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office [denounced](#) her murder and called for a full investigation.
- Human Rights Leader Accused of Supporting Violent, Illegal Groups** Lesbia Artola, the director of the CCDA in Alta Verapaz, has been defamed by the Ranchers Association of Alta Verapaz (FAV), which in an April 16 public statement said she was promoting land occupations and organized crime. The [CCDA](#) of the Verapaces is accompanied by Peace Brigades International. The FAV also demanded that the government and the army declare a state of siege in Alta Verapaz so as to enable the eviction of communities linked to the CCDA. The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OMCT-FIDH) [classified](#) the statement as an act of criminalization and stigmatization and urged Guatemalan authorities to take the necessary measures to end the escalating criminalization of the CCDA and to ensure the protection of human rights defenders.
- Lawyer's House Ransacked** The home of human rights attorney Esteban Celada was broken into and [ransacked](#) on April 22 as Esteban was attending to business related to a case. Nothing was stolen, but various things were destroyed and hateful messages were left. In December 2019 his house also was broken into; nothing was taken but his files had apparently been examined. He has reported 42 security incidents since May of last year and has been threatened, followed, and subjected to online harassment. In 2018, his sister was assassinated just after leaving his house. He has requested protective measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Celada is on the legal team representing the families of girls killed in the state-run home, Virgin of the Assumption, in 2016. He is also involved in the case of the 1981 forced disappearance by the military [of fourteen-year-old Marco Antonio MolinaTheissen](#).
- Labor Leader Arrested and Jailed** On April 6, Bernabé Gualná Caal, an indigenous Q'eqchi labor leader and member of the Sachaj Community Cooperative was arbitrarily arrested by National Civil Police in the municipality Raxruhá, Alta Verapaz, and transported to the prison in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, by order of the First Criminal Court in San Pedro Carcha. He is accused by the Chiquibul Industry, Inc., of illegal detention, aggravated trespassing, and other crimes and is in pretrial detention. As human rights organizations [note](#), he represents 300 workers contracted by [Chiquibul](#) who are demanding better conditions.

Journalists Harassed

Journalist's Home Broken Into, Equipment Stolen On April 18 at around 1:30 A.M., the home of *Prensa Comunitaria* journalist Carlos Ernesto Choc was broken into in El Estor, Izabal. His work equipment was stolen, including a camera and two cellphones, though money and other items of value in the home were left untouched. Choc [told](#) the Center to Protect Journalists that he believed the

robbery was an attempt to intimidate him and hinder his reporting on water shortages in a community near El Estor. Choc is facing criminal charges lodged against him in 2017 after he documented the murder of a fisherman during a peaceful demonstration opposing the Solway Nickel Mine. The police had denied that anyone one was killed during the protest. Choc had taken a [photo](#) of the murdered indigenous fisherman, Carlos Maaz. Choc and a journalist colleague, along with several members the artisanal fishermen’s guild, were charged with obstructing workers’ access to the mine.

Journalists Accuse President of Harassment, Intimidation, and Censorship On April 13, more than 100 Guatemalan journalists and human rights defenders [accused](#) President Giamattei of harassment, intimidation, and censorship. Two days earlier, in a speech broadcast on television, the president had said journalists were asking for the names and addresses of people ill with COVID-19, a charge journalists roundly deny. Several weeks earlier, he had insisted that journalists had forced their way into a hospital where Corona virus patients were being treated, a claim the government later retracted. Journalists also pointed out that Giamattei had threatened to use the Law of Public Order, which mandates that media are required to “edit publications that could cause confusion or panic or exacerbate the situation, as well as tendentious commentaries on current circumstances” or else face possible censorship. Journalists also stated that they are given information only through several government WhatsApp groups, and questions and comments are not allowed.

Leading Guatemalan Rights Organization Documents Continued Attacks on Defenders The Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEFUGA) released a [report](#) covering attacks on human rights defenders in 2019 and from January 1 to April 20 of this year. Under the new administration, UDEFEFUGA reports, attacks on defenders continue and hate speech has increased. According to the report, from January 1 to April 20, 2020, 157 attacks on human rights defenders occurred: 29 in January, 33 in February, 60 in March, and 35 during the part of April covered by the report. Last year was the third most violent in terms of attacks on human rights defenders since UDEFEFUGA began keeping records in 2000, with 494 attacks reported, 102 more than in 2018. The most targeted groups were indigenous defenders (111 attacks); journalists (104 attacks); and defenders advocating for the right to justice (76 attacks). According to the report, 13 cases of torture were documented in 2019, carried out against defenders by local officials and the National Civil Police. Fifteen defenders were murdered. Assassination and criminalization are the two strategies of repression most often used, UDEFEFUGA notes, with defamation and hate-speech campaigns continuing to be led by high-ranking government officials against defenders—especially land and territory defenders and journalists, and now defenders who are offering humanitarian assistance to fellow citizens during the COVID-19 crisis. According to UDEFEFUGA, President Jimmy Morales dismantled spaces of protection for human rights defenders and President Giamattei is maintaining that strategy. In a video presentation of the report, UDEFEFUGA General Coordinator Jorge Santos said the legislative agenda of the Guatemalan Congress is anti-human rights. He said that if the government during the pandemic doesn’t guarantee full human rights for all, there will not just be a big problem of subsistence in Guatemala but also of democracy, creating an even greater crisis. Santos said UDEFEFUGA hopes the government will implement policies that will deepen democracy in Guatemala and that the government will rethink the development model that has left Guatemalans in a state of inequality.

Giamattei Criticizes US for Deporting Migrants with COVID-19 As the health system reaches a [crisis point](#) in Guatemala, with representatives from various hospitals calling the situation “critical”

and “unprecedented,” President Giammattei lashed out at the United States government for sending COVID-infected migrants back to Guatemala. He made his comments in a [webcast](#) with the Atlantic Council on May 21. As the Associated Press [reports](#), President Giammattei expressed frustration: “This of allies with the United States isn’t true,” he said. “Guatemala is an ally of the United States, but the United States is not Guatemala’s ally. They don’t treat us like an ally.” According to AP, Guatemala has confirmed that 119 deportees arrived with COVID-19 from the United States. Guatemala has suspended the deportation flights on several occasions after infected passengers were detected, but has then resumed them after assurances from US authorities. The last flight with deportees who tested positive on arrival in Guatemala was reportedly on May 13 from Alexandria, Louisiana. The infected deportees, Giammattei said, were creating “serious problems” given the country’s overextended health system. The US embassy [responded](#) by delineating the various types of aid the US government is providing to Guatemala but did not address the issue of deportations of sick migrants.

For more information on Guatemala, see PBI Guatemala’s [Monthly Information Package](#). To learn more about attacks on environmental and land defenders in Alta Verapaz, see PBI Guatemala’s new [report](#) and recent [webinar](#).

HONDURAS

COVID-19 Cases and Repression Increase as Country Remains Under Lockdown

Hondurans remain under a country-wide lockdown. People are able to leave their homes only once a week for essential goods and services, while all nonessential businesses remain closed. As of May 25, 4,189 COVID-19 cases were confirmed, with 182 deaths. Between 500 and 600 people a day are being tested, with a third to a fourth of the tests showing positive results. The vast majority of the cases are in the northern departments of Cortes and Francisco Morazan. In an online event hosted by the [Inter-American Dialogue](#), Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, highlighted Honduras, along with Colombia and Venezuela, as examples of countries where protests against food, water, and medicine shortages were met by the government with violence. In at least three cases, security forces reportedly have opened fire on protesters, killing one (details are below). The United Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Honduras in an April 28 a statement reminded the Honduras government that the prohibition on the arbitrary deprivation of life, on torture, and other forms of mistreatment is absolute and called on the government to remove military forces from duties associated with the enforcing the curfew. In an interview on Honduran television, Jair Meza, spokesman for the National Police in Honduras, admitted that by April 21 at least 6,000 people had been arrested for curfew violations.

Former Police Chief Indicted in US for Drug Trafficking; President Again Implicated

On April 28, US prosecutors [announced](#) new charges linking Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández to drug trafficking. Prosecutors indicted former National Police Chief Juan Carlos Bonilla Valladares for overseeing the transshipment of multi-ton loads of cocaine to the US “on behalf of convicted former Honduran congressman Tony Hernandez and his brother the president.” According to the [indictment](#), “Bonilla used machineguns and other weaponry to accomplish that, and participated in extreme violence, including the murder of a rival trafficker, to further the conspiracy.” Bonilla is [reportedly](#) cooperating with prosecutors, thus avoiding detention, and will be a protected witness

against other Honduras drug traffickers. “For years, I and others warned US administrations that General Bonilla was not to be trusted, based on reports implicating him in drug trafficking and other crimes, including murder,” Senator Patrick J. Leahy said in a [statement](#). “Those warnings were ignored, and our Embassy treated him as a credible partner. That was inexcusable.” Leahy called for the State and Defense departments to reconsider delivering aid to a government “whose leaders are involved in corruption and violations of human rights.”

Military Police Kill a Bread Seller at a Checkpoint On April 24, a Military Police officer fired into a car stopped at a checkpoint in the town of Paraiso, in Omoa, Cortes, hitting Marvin Rolando Alvarado in the femoral artery. He died the following day. He was traveling with his brother and cousins, and the group was returning to their community after selling bread. At the checkpoint at the entrance to their community, they were reportedly asked by Military Police officers why they were not wearing masks. An argument ensued. The Military Police officers, one of whom [reportedly](#) went by the last name of Rivas and the other by the name of Josué Alvarado, opened fire on the group after first beating the men. Héctor Arturo Alvarado, also shot in the leg, was seriously injured.

National Police Use Live Ammunition Against Protesters, Wounding Two On April 23, according to an [interview with witnesses](#) carried out by Radio Progreso, the National Police of Honduras used live ammunition on protesters in the community of Las Metalias, in Tela, Atlantida. Two people were injured: one protester was grazed by a bullet, leaving a wound to his head, and another was wounded in the arm. The community was protesting the politicization of food distribution. Community leaders had made an arrangement with the mayor that food would be delivered to local community leaders and church leaders, who had made a list of the 80 neediest people the food would then go to. But when the army arrived with the food, it was not given to community leaders to distribute. Instead, soldiers demanded the ID cards of anyone who wanted food. The community refused to hand over their IDs to be scanned, fearing they would be pressured eventually into voting for the National Party. The soldiers therefore left, without giving the community any food, and community members protested, blocking the road. The National Police to dislodge the protest shot teargas and, according to Radio Progreso, [fired](#) live ammunition into the crowd. The Bishop of La Ceiba [denounced](#) the incident.

In the Department of Santa Barbara, a coordinator of Sinager [resigned](#) on April 15, citing the politicized distribution of food. Ramon Lara, as he resigned, said the “solidarity bags,” as the food distributions are called, were only going to those affiliated with the National Party.

National Police and soldiers reportedly fired on another group of protesters on May 14, in in the municipality of Pespire, Choluteca, according to reports. Around 40 moto taxi drivers were protesting peacefully in the main road, demanding that they be allowed to work. For two months, the quarantine had prevented them from working, yet they had bills to pay, including payments to make on their vehicles. Instead of negotiating with them, the mayor called in the police and army to break up the protest. Around 10:00 AM, more than 50 elements of the police and armed forces arrived and, according to reports, without addressing a word to the protesters they turned a high-pressure water hose on them. They clubbed protesters and fired teargas at them and also fired live ammunition, according to the human rights organization [ACI PARTICIPA](#).

Five Cases of Torture and 11,000 Arbitrary Detentions Documented in April The Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) has released a [report](#) documenting the human rights situation in Honduras during the month of April. The report highlights as an urgent matter the growing food insecurity which has resulted from the quarantine. COFADEH notes the “economic

vulnerability of more than 3 million people who are isolated and without income, laid off from work or in the process of being suspended, without being able to seek out their daily break and without transport to move their agricultural products” The report provides a careful catalogue of the violations of various rights, from socioeconomic rights to rights to life and physical safety, and reveals the suffering of various vulnerable populations, including the indigenous and Garifuna, LGBTQ+, political prisoners, and others. As the report states, “Human rights organizations are receiving testimonies accompanied by video footage on a daily basis of the abuses by police officers and soldiers, in which they can be seen firing directly at the population and savagely beating people. . . .” The report details cases of torture, such as the beatings, repeated application of pepper spray, and electric shocks suffered by community journalist Mario Javier García until he lost consciousness in the police station after being arrested in Liure, in El Paraíso. He was released after 24 hours with chest pain, abdominal pain, and broken teeth. Reports of waterboarding-like torture are also included in the report, as well as in [newspaper reports](#).

In a May 24 [Urgent Action](#), COFADEH denounces seven cases in May in which people were beaten and mistreated by security forces, including two cases of torture.

Trans Women Suffer Hardship and Attacks During Lockdown As PBI’s Honduras Project [reports](#), trans women are hard hit by the quarantine the government has had in place for months. Their economic marginalization has left them more heavily impacted by the current crisis, yet they are not recognized as a vulnerable population, so getting aid has been difficult. Obtaining a safe conduct pass for human rights or humanitarian work is a long and complicated process for members of any organization, national or international. According to Danny Reyes, Director of the PBI-accompanied organization Arcoiris, no safe conduct passes are being given to any LGBTQ+ organization in the country because to provide such permits, as he says, “would be an official act of recognition and accreditation of our work.” Since mid-March, at least 20 increasingly violent attacks on transgender women have been reported, carried out by Military Police, National Police, and private security guards.

COPINH Member Arbitrarily Detained While Distributing Food A member of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) was arrested near El Cerrón, in the department of La Paz, according to a May 12 [statement](#) by COPINH. José Trochez, a member of the General Coordination of COPINH, had a safe conduct pass that exempted him from the curfew in order to do humanitarian work. He was distributing food to an indigenous community when he was arrested by a soldier named Manuel Soriano, according to COPINH. PBI Honduras accompanies COPINH and was called on to assist in the matter. Trochez was taken to the police station in Cabañas, La Paz, and was later released.

PBI Honduras has received numerous other reports of attacks on and harassment of land and environmental defenders, whose work is hindered to begin with by the restrictions of the quarantine. The continued work of large-scale mining, hydroelectric, and other extractive projects, meanwhile, has been facilitated. The Honduran government has put a virtual platform in place to process requests for and renewals of environmental permits. [According](#) to the National Coalition of Environmental Networks and Organisations, the move represents another initiative to limit access to land and natural resources for rural communities. During the quarantine, consultations with communities affected by these projects cannot be carried out.

Attacks on Journalists Continue [According](#) to the press freedom group C-Libre, 30 attacks on journalists have been carried out since March 16. C-Libre highlights as the aggressors the Municipal

Police in Tegucigalpa, the National Police, and Military Police. A recent case of harassment involved the detention of a foreign correspondent working for the Iranian new outlet HISPAN TV. On May 18, journalist Dassaev Aguilar was stopped at a checkpoint and arrested, threatened, and detained by National Police officers, in spite of having all his press credentials in order and in spite of showing them to the police. In 2018 and 2019, C-Libre reported five attacks on the HISPAN TV correspondent, ranging from verbal and physical attacks to destruction of equipment. Several more recent attacks on journalists, involving arbitrary arrests and destruction of equipment, are detailed in a [statement](#) signed by dozens of international organizations urging the Honduran government to end excessive use of force by security forces and cease the restrictions and abuses that make it difficult for human rights defenders and journalists to carry out their work.

For more information on Honduras and PBI's work there, visit the [website](#) of PBI Honduras. Information on land struggles during the COVID-19 crisis can be found [here](#). Information on criminalization of defenders in the context of COVID-19, including the Guapinol water defenders, can be found in [this video](#), which also explores impunity and examines recent events in the Berta Caceres case.

MEXICO

Since the Mexican government [declared](#) a “health emergency by force majeure” on March 30, reports of violence throughout the country have increased. At least four human rights defenders and two journalists have been murdered (for details, see below). The increase in violence has particularly affected land rights defenders. Attacks against migrants have also increased, and the number of femicides has risen. Land rights defenders and others living in rural areas face multiple risks, given the lack of infrastructure and healthcare, the presence of organized crime, and the authorities' limited capacity to respond. In addition to the violence, PBI's Mexico Project is concerned about the suspension of legal procedures for public health reasons, including the suspension of consultations of indigenous peoples about large-scale projects which affect them, and the commencement of or continuation of work on megaprojects. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, work has begun on the “Mayan Train,” despite the suspension of the Environmental Impact Evaluation and the deferral of the indigenous consultation process. In other indigenous territories—such as those of the Choréachi community in Chihuahua, which has protective measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights—there have been attempts to illegally log forests.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders and Journalist Appear to Have Doubled Since March 15, when the Mexican government declared that social distancing protocols should be followed, 44 attacks on human rights defenders and journalists have been reported. In that time period, at least two journalists and four human rights defenders have been murdered. According to the Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, in 2019 a total of 295 attacks on defenders and journalists were reported—an average of 24.5 per month—suggesting that in the context of the health crisis, attacks on defenders and journalists have doubled. According to Espacio-OSC, a coalition of civil society organizations that work in Mexico, President López Obrador's hostile discourse toward the press has contributed to the hostile atmosphere they face. Espacio-OSC is also concerned that measures in place in Guerrero, Michoacán, Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Jalisco, Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Morelos, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Oaxaca restrict freedom of transit and freedom of assembly, hindering the work of human rights defenders and journalists. The work of

defenders and journalists is not considered an essential activity in these states, in spite of the decree issued by the federal government deeming it such. In a [letter](#) addressed to various federal officials, Espacio-OSC called on the government to strengthen the Federal Protection Mechanism, formed to provide protection measures to journalists and human rights defenders under threat.

According to a recent [analysis](#) by the Washington Office on Latin America, Mexico lacks integrated public policies designed to confront the root causes of the violence directed at journalists and human rights defenders. Defamation campaigns and criminalization by public officials, a failure to implement firm measures against illegal natural-resource extraction and other practices that damage the environment, and the failure to investigate and punish those responsible for attacks on freedom of expression contribute to the hostile environment journalists and defenders face in their daily lives.

Mexican Military Newly Authorized to Carry Out Public Security On May 11, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador through a new [decree](#) allowed the Mexican Armed Forces to perform certain public security functions that had previously been the province of the police and National Guard. Doing initial investigations, taking control of evidence, and booking arrested suspects are among the duties the decree assigns to the Armed Forces. A key part of López Obrador's electoral platform was to remove the armed forces from the streets and civilian security duties. The UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) in Mexico expressed [concern](#) about the decree. The OHCHR argued that, while the decree terms these duties “exceptional,” it does not spell out the justification for this move or contain enough information to allow an evaluation of whether the accord complies with constitutional and international law. The UN office asked that the accord be reviewed. Human rights groups in Mexico also expressed concern; the Mexican Army and Navy have a record of serious human rights abuses. Soldiers, for example, are [credibly alleged](#) of involvement in the disappearance of 43 students in from [Ayotzinapa](#), in Iguala, Guerrero, in 2014. Soldiers have also committed and been internationally criticized for [extrajudicial executions](#) and torture. “In effect, the army and navy are going to be handling police duties until 2024,” Santiago Aguirre, director of the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre in Mexico City, told the [Guardian](#).

Mexican Court Orders Release of Vulnerable Detained Migrants A Mexican court in mid-May [ordered](#) the National Migration Institute (INM) to adopt a series of urgent measures to protect the health, life, and safety of migrants held in 33 detention centers and 10 temporary government shelters throughout the country. The ruling followed an injunction presented by the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights against the INM for not adopting and implementing adequate health protocols for detained migrants in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant detention centers are frequently overcrowded and lack adequate health services and facilities, factors which could lead to mass contagion. The court ruled that the INM must release elderly adults, children and teenagers, and those who are in particular risk categories. The INM must provide health services and programs to migrants, and provide detained migrants with regular medical checks, as well as guaranteeing access to basic personal hygiene items, drinking water, and healthy food.

Work on Maya Train Continues; Human Rights Commission Calls for Urgent Suspension The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) on May 14 [ordered](#) the National Fund for Tourism to urgently implement protective measures to suspend nonessential activities involving the Maya Train. The CNDH did not, however, define which activities were nonessential. A 950-mile [project](#) that extends through Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas, and the Yucatán, work on the large-scale rail project has continued throughout the pandemic, placing workers at serious risk. Maya Train is a

flagship program of the Lopez Obrador government, aimed at bringing jobs and development to some of Mexico's poorest areas. The project has been met with protests by environmental and indigenous rights groups who cite the environmental damage that will be caused by the train and related infrastructure and the effects on the social and cultural rights of the indigenous. The federal government had exempted work on the Maya Train from any COVID-19 related restrictions.

March and April Among the Most Violent Months on Record March was the most [violent](#) month in Mexico in at least two decades. April was the third most violent month since daily record-keeping began in the late 1990s, with 2,492 homicides reported during the month--an average of 83 murders a day. For more information on Mexico and PBI's work there, visit the project's [website](#).

The PBI projects with teams on the ground in various countries have issued a series of recommendations to the international community, including the following:

Publicly oppose the excessive use of force by state and/or private security forces against the population.

Echo the requests of the international bodies that call upon states to guarantee the highest respect for human rights in the application of containment measures to halt the spread of COVID-19.

Given the COVID emergency and restrictions on the full defense of rights and expression of dissent, draw attention to calls in favor of a moratorium on external activities in indigenous territories where express consent has not been given, as well as territories where the affected population have expressed their opposition.

[Peace Brigades International](#) is a nongovernmental organization with consultative status before the United Nations. PBI 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, PBI has worked in fourteen countries on four continents. PBI's international office in Brussels and advocacy staff around the world support efforts in the field to open space for peace and for the defense of human rights.