PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN GUATEMALA
OUR MISSION

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by advocating for U.S. and international policies to achieve justice and equality worldwide.

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN GUATEMALA

Guatemala is a country of striking natural beauty and cultural diversity—distinguished by its volcanic mountains and rolling valleys, and home to an array of indigenous communities descended from the ancient Mayan civilization. It is also a nation recovering from a brutal civil war, in which the Guatemalan army systematically terrorized, tortured and murdered more than 200,000 people—most of whom were Mayan—using a strategy many human rights groups have described as genocide.

The country’s wounds are still evident 20 years since the war ended. Government corruption is widespread; organized and violent crime are prevalent; and more than half of the population lives below the poverty line¹—particularly indigenous people and women. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Guatemala’s wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small group of high-ranking politicians, military leaders and business elites. Individuals who speak out against this inequality or expose human rights abuses risk being harassed, assaulted and even murdered.

AJWS has supported human rights efforts in Guatemala since 2004. Today we fund 16 organizations focused on empowering the country’s poorest and most oppressed populations—particularly women, youth, small farmers and indigenous people—to speak up, organize and take the lead in transforming their communities. Against great odds, these groups are working to stop violence and corruption, end discrimination based on ethnicity and gender, and protect rural Guatemalans from threats to their land and livelihoods.

WHERE OUR GRANTEES WORK

GUATEMALA

REGIONAL GRANTEES COVERING GUATEMALA:

Red Latinoamericana contra Represas y por los Ríos, sus Comunidades y el Agua (RedLAR)

AJWS GRANTEES IN GUATEMALA:

Agencia de Noticias Prensa Comunitaria Km. 169 (Prensa Comunitaria)
Asociación de Mujeres de Petén Ixqik
Asociación de Mujeres Q’eqchi’es Nuevo Horizonte (Nuevo Horizonte)
Casa Roja
Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA)
Consejo Nacional de Desplazados de Guatemala (CONDEG)
Cooperativa Organización de Trabajadores por la Resistencia y la Autonomía (La Otra Cooperativa)
Coordinadora Departamental de Comadronas Tradicionales de Quetzaltenango (CODECOT)

Equipo de Trabajo e Investigación “Entre Ríos” (Entre Ríos)
Frente Petenero Contra las Represas (FPCR)
La Cuerda
La Enredadera de Mujeres (La Enredadera)
Puente de Paz/Asociación de Comunidades para el Desarrollo, Defensa de la Tierra y Recursos Naturales (PDP/ACODET)
Red de Jóvenes para la Incidencia Política (Incide Joven)
Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (UDEFEGUA)
Unión Verapacense de Organizaciones Campesinas (UVOC)
The roots of Guatemala’s contemporary human rights challenges can be traced back to the 1520s, when Spanish conquistadors first stepped foot on Guatemalan territory with the intention of annexing it to the Spanish empire. But like Mexico to the north, Guatemala was already inhabited by hundreds of thousands of indigenous people, the majority of whom were descendants of one of the ancient world’s greatest civilizations: the Maya.

**THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MAYAN EMPIRE**

The Mayan civilization began its slow rise to power in 2600 B.C.E. and peaked between 250 and 900 A.D. At its height, the empire included up to two million people and stretched from the southern-most states of modern Mexico, across Guatemala, to the western reaches of Honduras and El Salvador.

Archaeological sites reveal that the ancient Maya were an advanced people with their own alphabet, calendar and irrigation system, as well as distinctive architecture that includes their iconic stepped pyramids. The Maya spoke dozens of languages and worshipped multiple gods representing the natural world—from the sun and moon, to the rain and corn. Their kings were believed to be related to these gods, giving them special powers. Within this diverse realm, Mayan kingdoms periodically fought one another, vying for territory and control.

The Mayan civilization began to decline in 900 A.D. for unknown reasons; yet many elements of Mayan culture—including its languages and religion—have survived until today, and remain central to indigenous Guatemalan identity.
In the early 16th century, Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado divided and conquered the last of the Mayan kingdoms. Notorious for his cruelty, Alvarado slaughtered thousands of Mayan people during his reign and forced thousands more to convert to Christianity in an effort to destroy their indigenous culture.

In the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule that followed his takeover of Guatemala, Spanish colonists formed an elite, ruling class that governed the indigenous inhabitants under a system known as encomienda, which was similar to the European feudal system. The ruling class seized large tracts of ancestral lands from indigenous communities and forced the local population to work the land as unpaid laborers in an arrangement that basically amounted to slavery.

On September 15, 1821, Guatemala declared its independence from Spain. The 140-year period that followed was a tumultuous time marked by a succession of leaders, many of them dictators, who trampled upon civil liberties and sold or gave away large tracts of land to private owners and foreign companies. One of the most pivotal of these leaders was Jorge Ubico, who assumed power in 1931.

Ubico governed Guatemala as a police state. A despot with absolute power, he bestowed special privileges on the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company, which already monopolized the coffee and banana trade and owned all of Guatemala’s ports, railroads and communications systems. Ubico exempted United Fruit Company from taxes and gave them 200,000 additional hectares of territory—including land held by rural communities. With Guatemala’s farmland consolidating into just a few powerful hands, the majority of the country’s farmers became dependent on the low-paying, menial and often dangerous jobs offered by United Fruit, or were forced to work as indebted laborers to the wealthy landowners who owned the rest of the country’s arable land.

Ubico took his dictatorship a step too far in 1944, when he suspended the freedoms of speech and the press—echoing the fascist measures taken earlier by Hitler in Germany and alarming the U.S. government and its allies, who were already embroiled in World War II. Determined to maintain their freedom, the people of Guatemala revolted and Ubico fled the country. In his place, they elected a series of presidents who championed social reforms. One of these leaders, Jacobo Arbenz, passed land reforms offering pathways for peasants to reclaim farmland held by United Fruit Company and other landowners.

Although Arbenz's policies pleased the beleaguered rural poor, they enraged United Fruit and its American backers and sparked fears in the U.S. that Arbenz was abetting the spread of communism in Central America. President Eisenhower sought a regime change, but to avoid the impression of attacking an ally, he used the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to resolve the situation. The CIA recruited and trained an opposition force that overthrew Arbenz in 1954 and installed a military junta to replace him.

Many elements of Mayan culture have survived until today, and remain central to indigenous Guatemalan identity.

The new government rounded up thousands of leftists and dissenters and executed hundreds of prisoners. It crushed labor unions, which had flourished since 1944; reversed agrarian reforms; and restored United Fruit Company’s ownership of the land. Many Guatemalans opposed these brutal tactics and attempted to wrest control from the junta. The junta’s leader, Castillo Armas, was assassinated in 1957, and Guatemalan politics erupted into a series of coups and countercoups, coupled with severe repression of the country’s people. In 1960, a group of young military officers rebelled. Some of their leaders joined leftist and other political dissidents to form guerrilla groups. These rebels soon launched attacks on the government, igniting decades of civil war.

According to the UN, during Guatemala's 36-year civil conflict, armed forces killed or disappeared (abducted and likely murdered) over 200,000 men, women and children; 83 percent of these victims were Mayan. The Guatemalan military was responsible for more than 90 percent of these atrocities, using vicious tactics to suppress dissent—particularly about the use of land. Throughout the war, Guatemalan soldiers systematically attacked rural communities it suspected were supporting the rebels—detaining, torturing, raping and massacring hundreds of thousands of people in the process. In many cases, the victims were peaceful, indigenous farmers with no links to the guerrilla fighters.

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One of the most horrific civil war massacres occurred in the 1980s, when the Guatemalan military slaughtered more than 400 men, women and children in an effort to forcibly evict thousands of people to make way for the now infamous Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam—a project backed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (see story on page 18). During the same period, Guatemalan President José Efraín Ríos Montt launched a “scorched earth” operation during which soldiers systematically raped, tortured and killed Mayan civilians in 626 villages. The bloodshed finally ceased in 1996, when the Guatemalan government and guerrilla leaders signed peace accords after several years of bitter negotiations.

SEEKING JUSTICE FOR WAR CRIMES
The fighting is now over, but the civil war continues to haunt the Guatemalan people, many of whom are still clamoring for justice. The ongoing legal case against Ríos Montt demonstrates the elusiveness of such justice. Following years of courageous advocacy by human rights defenders and survivors of his attacks, Ríos Montt was finally prosecuted and, in 2013, sentenced to 80 years in prison for crimes against humanity and genocide. Weeks later, the Constitutional Court—which is controlled by the political and economic elite—overturned the verdict, claiming the trial was flawed. A new trial began in March 2016.

Activists have made some progress in other struggles for justice. Survivors of the Chixoy Dam massacre fought for decades to attract global attention to the atrocity and gain reparations for their immeasurable losses. In January 2014, they won a case that granted them $154 million in reparations from the government, which delivered the first payments in October 2015. Also in 2014, former guerrilla fighter Felipe Solano Barillas was convicted for a 1988 massacre of 22 people. In January 2016, 18 former military officers were arrested on charges related to disappearances and massacres. And in February 2016, a former military officer and a former paramilitary officer were convicted of war crimes, including sexual enslavement of women (see story on page 16). Yet while these court cases bring some measure of closure to those who suffered the brutalities of the war, the people of Guatemala still bear many wounds that even decisive legal victories cannot heal.

SEEKING JUSTICE FOR WAR CRIMES

A woman hides her face to testify against the former military members responsible for her rape and enslavement during Guatemala’s civil war. In February 2016, the men were sentenced to 360 years in prison for their crimes. (See story, page 16)

9 One of the accused—Edgar Justin Ovalle—could not be arrested due to the fact that he is currently a legislator and has immunity.
10 Ruis-Navarro, Catalina. “Guatemala sexual slavery verdict shows women’s bodies are not battlefields.” The Guardian. 29 February 2016.
SNAPSHOT OF GUATEMALA’S CHALLENGES

- Guatemala has one of the most unequal distributions of income in Latin America. More than 50 percent of the nation lives below the poverty line—a figure that jumps to 80 percent in rural areas that are home to predominantly indigenous people.12

- Land distribution in Guatemala is also highly skewed, with 80% of arable land in the hands of less than 5% of the population.13

- Guatemala faces extreme rates of corruption. According to the watchdog organization, Transparency International, it is the 123rd most corrupt country (out of 168 surveyed).14

- Hunger is a major challenge facing Guatemalan families, particularly in indigenous communities. Over 40 percent of Guatemalan children under age five—and 80 percent of indigenous children—are malnourished.15

- Each year, corporations and landowners displace thousands of indigenous people and farmers from their land to make way for development projects that primarily benefit the economic and political elite.

- Human rights defenders face high levels of harassment and physical threats. These attacks occur at an average rate of at least one per day, with 4,485 incidents documented between 2000 and mid-2015. In 2015 alone, 15 murders and 493 attacks against activists were reported.

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POST-WAR CHALLENGES: INEQUALITY, CARTELS AND CORRUPTION
The tensions over land, ethnicity and economic inequality that fueled the civil war continue to permeate Guatemalan society today.

Guatemala has the second highest rate of income inequality in Latin America. Eighty percent of rural people live in poverty, and less than five percent of the population owns 80 percent of the land. The Maya make up about half of the country’s 14.6 million people, but they have little power in the government or other decision-making forums and continue to experience intense discrimination. Indigenous women are doubly disadvantaged because they experience discrimination and violence because of their gender as well as their ethnicity. This social inequality plays out in devastating ways: For example, nearly twice as many indigenous women die in childbirth as non-indigenous women because they lack access to quality health care.

Land issues remain at the heart of many of Guatemala’s economic, social and political divisions. Across the country and with the tacit support of the government, foreign companies and members of the land-holding Guatemalan elite have continued to displace rural people to make way for mining sites, dams and agricultural estates. The displaced often relocate to places where farmland and other resources vital to their survival are scarce, pushing them deeper into poverty. Those who manage to remain on their land must live in the midst of mines, hydroelectric dams, and palm oil, sugar cane and banana plantations that have destroyed their farmland and polluted their water.

As a major corridor for smuggling drugs from South America to the U.S., Guatemala has experienced a surge in violence from street gangs and other organized crime. Although the war on drugs has increased local police presence, officers receive low pay and poor training, and are largely outgunned by drug traffickers and other criminal cartels. Faced with these challenges, some police abuse their power to gain additional income or respect. In some cases, top police officials have been involved or colluded with drug cartels or drug runners.

The global corruption monitoring organization Transparency International rates Guatemala among the most corrupt countries in the world, for the prevalence of fraud, bribery and misuse of government funds. The country’s leaders were once completely immune to punishment for such crimes; but in recent years, civil society groups and the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) have had some success in routing out high-profile corruption. In 2015, under pressure from civil society groups and CICIG, Guatemala’s Congress lifted President Otto Pérez Molina’s immunity to facilitate an investigation into his alleged involvement in a customs bribery ring. On September 3, a judge issued a warrant for Molina’s arrest, prompting him to resign. Molina and his vice president, Roxana Baldetti, are currently in prison awaiting trial.

Eager for a fresh start, Guatemalans elected former comedian Jimmy Morales to succeed Molina as president in October 2015. Yet Morales’ election also raised concerns, as he received backing from former military officers implicated in civil war massacres. It is yet to be seen whether he has the will, the integrity or the capacity to tackle the country’s most pressing problems.

THE RISK OF SPEAKING OUT
In recent years, more and more Guatemalans have spoken out against the injustices in their country.

These brave activists often face violent suppression of their activities. Between 2000 and mid-2015, AJWS grantee UDEFEGUA documented 4,485 acts of harassment, intimidation or violence against human rights defenders—roughly one attack per day. The perpetrators are usually thugs or assassins hired by corporations, drug cartels or corrupt officials. In some cases the attackers are private or state security forces. Unfortunately, according to activists, Guatemalan police and courts typically respond with indifference or even aggression toward the victims and the people who care about them.

Despite the risks, Guatemalan human rights groups are pressing on in their quest for a more just and equal society. AJWS is supporting a number of these brave groups that are aiming to preserve Mayan life and culture, protect civil liberties, and ensure that all Guatemalan citizens may one day enjoy the full range of freedoms and the prosperity they deserve.

Activists Emanuel Sabuc and Carlos Roberto Bajan use radio to teach listeners about human rights and sustainable farming in Sololá. The pair are members of CCDA, a grassroots group that uses funding from AJWS to empower indigenous people across Guatemala. (See story, page 15)
Guatemala’s complex history has given rise to many of its contemporary challenges—from the striking gap between the very rich and the poor, to pervasive government corruption, to widespread discrimination against indigenous people and women. Fortunately, Guatemala also has a long legacy of grassroots social movements striving to overcome these challenges. Many of the individuals and organizations leading these movements are organizations that AJWS supports. They are using peaceful means to gain equality for women and indigenous communities, protect access to the land and resources upon which millions depend for survival, and press for an end to government corruption and the lack of justice for serious crimes—including those committed during the war. Their ultimate aim is to build a flourishing democracy in which all Guatemalans are treated with respect and dignity.

For example:

**Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (UDEFEGUA)** defends the safety and security of Guatemalan activists who speak truth to power. UDEFEGUA documents and reports harassment and attacks; trains organizations to protect their staff, offices and information; and has brought landmark cases to court on behalf of activists who have lost their lives in pursuit of equality and justice (see story page 16).

**Prensa Comunitaria** is a grassroots media organization that supports a network of 50 community-based reporters throughout Guatemala. Their members report directly from communities about human rights struggles that are often ignored, suppressed or distorted by the mainstream media. Despite experiencing a regular assault of threats and attacks, Prensa Comunitaria journalists remain steadfast in their commitment to local reporting. The Guatemala Human Rights Commission—a Washington, D.C.-based group dedicated to promoting human rights in Guatemala—honored the activists for their courage in 2015.
with the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award, recognizing that “correspondents from Prensa Comunitaria have continued to challenge the systems that seek to silence them. Their valuable work represents an ongoing effort to defend the right to freedom of expression and to freedom of the press.”

Frente Petenero Contra las Represas (FPCR) supports communities working to stop the construction of dams that will flood their land and cut them off from vital sources of food, drinking water and livelihoods. In 2012, this group assisted a community in Petén to organize against a government-sponsored dam project. FPCR facilitated a referendum in which 98 percent of local residents voted against the dam, prompting government authorities to cancel the project. This marked the first time a major conflict over a dam ended peacefully and in favor of the local people. Since 2009, FPCR has been collaborating with other AJWS grantees in Guatemala and Mexico to halt the construction of five more hydroelectric dams on the Usumacinta River—the largest river in Central America. They hope to convince the dams’ backers to consult with the communities whose lives and homes are at stake, before going forward with the project.

Asociación de Comunidades para el Desarrollo, Defensa de la Tierra y Recursos Naturales (ACODET) is another key player in the movement to stop dam projects that threaten rural communities. In 2014, after years of advocacy, ACODET and area communities had a major success when they forced the government to halt its plans to build the Xalala Dam on the Chixoy River. This massive project—intended for the same river where hundreds of civilians were massacred to make way for a previous dam—would displace more than 2,000 people and impact the livelihoods of 8,000 indigenous farmers.

Asociación de Mujeres Qeqchi’es Nuevo Horizonte trains and empowers indigenous Q’eqchi’ women in Chisec, Alta Verapaz, to understand their rights, become politically active and address problems facing their communities. Thanks to the confidence and skills they have gained, local women now regularly represent Q’eqchi’ women and girls in local government meetings where women’s voices were previously absent. The group has also waged a community awareness campaign aimed at reducing sexual and domestic violence. Their advocacy led Chisec to increase resources for the Municipal Office for Women, which is charged with reducing gender-based violence and addressing other trends that negatively affect women and girls.

Red de Jóvenes para la Incidencia Política (Incide Joven) heads a network of over 100 youth leaders working with young people across the country to curb Guatemala’s high rates of teenage pregnancy, early marriage and sexual violence. Incide Joven’s network covers nine of Guatemala’s 22 departments, where members are providing comprehensive sexuality education to youth—many of whom are indigenous—at the community level. This group’s ultimate aim is to get comprehensive sex ed into school curricula—a goal they are pursuing through a relentless, national advocacy campaign that has brought them up against some formidable foes (see story page 20).

Coordinadora Departamental de Comadronas Tradicionales de Quetzaltenango (CODECOT) supports a network of 800 midwives throughout Quetzaltenango, where midwives attend 80 percent of all births and yet face intense discrimination in the health care sector. Authorities routinely blame them for infant and maternal deaths, especially in rural areas without hospitals. When midwives refer their patients to hospitals, the staff often prevent them from visiting their patients, and then blame them for not bringing the patients sooner when things go wrong—even when the hospital itself is at fault. Through advocacy and education, CODECOT has markedly improved the situation for midwives and their patients. For example, in 2003, a committee established thanks to CODECOT’s advocacy investigated maternal and infant deaths and acquitted many midwives of wrongful charges levied against them. CODECOT also provides midwives with the equipment and training to deliver safer, more sophisticated care for mothers and their babies.

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AJWS is committed to helping Guatemalans implement local solutions of their choosing to the complex challenges they face. We focus on supporting grassroots organizations that represent people who experience severe inequality in society—particularly indigenous people, women and youth. AJWS funding enables our grantees to become stronger and more effective, join forces with others, and amplify their strategies and messages so they can create powerful movements for justice, equality and human rights.

With AJWS’s support, these organizations are:

- Educating and empowering oppressed communities to learn about and exercise their human rights, assume leadership roles in their communities and organize local responses when their rights are violated.
- Supporting and strengthening social change organizations led by and for indigenous people, women, youth, small-scale farmers and human rights defenders.
- Conducting political and legal advocacy to stop violations of civil rights, including discrimination, corruption and violence.
- Speaking out and advocating against projects that encroach on local people’s land and waterways, including dams, mines and plantations developed without their consent.
- Working to prevent the hunger and poverty that results when development displaces indigenous people and others from the land they depend on for survival.
- Supporting Guatemalan human rights defenders to protect themselves from threats and violence and seek justice when attacks occur.
- Forging coalitions and alliances with other grassroots groups in Guatemala and across Latin America to create stronger movements for human rights in the region.

AJWS FUNDING IN GUATEMALA

In Thousands

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$3.6 MILLION
invested in Guatemala since 2004
BEYOND GRANTMAKING: HOW DOES AJWS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

AJWS provides financial support and more to strengthen social change organizations and larger movements. To accomplish this we:

- Support grantees for multiple years, because sustainable change takes time
- Invest in nascent organizations and help them grow bigger and stronger
- Address the root causes of human rights abuses
- Bring clusters of similar and complementary groups together, enabling them to learn from each other and build strong, united movements
- Promote our grantees in the media and foster their leadership on the international stage
- Ensure that women, indigenous people, LGBT people, religious and ethnic minorities, and other groups remain at the center of our social change efforts
- Conduct research and share our findings with grantees and fellow funders, advancing the field of human rights and development
AJWS’s grantees in Guatemala are making progress against tremendous odds. Their stories show how grassroots activists are securing justice for war crimes, protecting the land and advancing human rights for all Guatemalans.
Rural communities work together to defend their land and way of life.

In Guatemala, peasants whose families have lived and farmed the same plots of land for generations are facing rapid encroachment on their land and way of life. Many small farming communities—including indigenous communities—lack official land titles, despite obvious historic and cultural ties to their territory. Even when communities can show proof of ownership of their land, corrupt lawyers, government officials and landowners can use their stature and connections to prove otherwise. Because of this vulnerability, corporations and landowners backed by the government and the judiciary displace and sometimes forcibly evict many residents in order to use the land to mine or plant crops for export. Those who remain often have difficulty supporting their families when the soil, water or forests that once nurtured life are damaged or destroyed.

Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA) is a grassroots organization of small farmers working in 16 departments of Guatemala to confront land rights challenges and meet the needs of rural, predominantly Mayan communities. CCDA’s founders began working together in the 1980s and became a formal nonprofit in 2000. Together, they help local farmers protest harmful farming techniques that are spoiling natural resources; protect their land from environmental damage; and learn to survive despite their changed landscape. In partnership with other farmer-led groups, CCDA also compiles accounts of human rights abuses and brings this information to the public’s attention, leading protests and advocating for national legislation that will better protect the rights of local farmers.

Using coffee and advocacy to secure land rights

In the department of Sololá, CCDA members have developed jointly owned businesses and improved the economic stability of small farming communities. One of its most successful initiatives is a fair-trade organic coffee project, through which CCDA members grow beans that CCDA processes and markets to global partners. The profits CCDA generates are invested in local projects such as chicken coops, community gardens and, in one town, a school. These projects benefit the entire community, providing additional food, income and other social benefits.

“We're not just in the business of buying and selling coffee. We are using the resources we have to work for justice in our communities.”

—Leocadio Juracán, Former coordinator of CCDA

Like many human rights activists in Guatemala, many members of CCDA—including Leocadio—have received death threats and have been subjected to other acts of intimidation. In 2010, more than 27,000 pounds of coffee were stolen from a CCDA processing center—a theft widely believed to be retaliation for a human rights report released by CCDA. Despite the risks, CCDA members continue to advocate for their land rights and work toward a fair future for rural communities across Guatemala.

An award-winning NGO helps activists stay safe so they can keep speaking out against injustice.

“We are telling the truth. We want to be heard, and we want justice,” said a petite, elderly woman to a room full of journalists and human rights activists in Guatemala City on February 13, 2016. A survivor of sexual slavery during Guatemala’s decades-long civil war, the woman’s face was obscured by a Mayan scarf to protect her identity. But her message was clear: She and 14 fellow survivors wanted justice for the years of abuses they endured at the hands of Guatemalan soldiers, and they wanted it now.

Two weeks later, the survivors got the justice they demanded. On February 29, Guatemala’s High Risk Court convicted former military officer Esteelmer Reyes Girón and former paramilitary officer Heriberto Valdez Asij of war crimes committed in Sepur Zarco village, sentencing them to a total of 360 years in prison. In addition to being held responsible for enslaving the women, the men were found culpable for multiple murders and forced disappearances that occurred in Sepur Zarco during the early 1980s.

Protecting those who risk their lives for truth and justice

The Sepur Zarco verdict was a victory in Guatemalans’ ongoing pursuit of justice for atrocities committed during the war. But it may not have been possible without the support of a number of brave Guatemalan human rights activists and groups—including Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (UDEFEGUA), a longtime AJWS grantee that helped ensure the safety and security of the women and their lawyers during the trial.

Established in 2000, UDEFEGUA works to protect human rights defenders—from citizens like the defendants in the Sepur Zarco case, to civil society activists, to journalists—who speak out or take risks in defense of justice.
UDEFEGUA supports these defenders by monitoring and reporting on relevant security threats; providing counseling and legal aid; teaching strategies to improve security for both defenders and the sensitive information they possess; and advocating for laws and policies that advance the protection and rights of individuals and organizations working to promote human rights.

During the Sepur Zarco trial, UDEFEGUA accompanied the 15 survivors to court each day, offering moral support to the women. Its staff also ensured the women’s protection and intervened when they were being harassed by onlookers.

“At the beginning of the trial, there was a man outside the court with a microphone calling the women prostitutes and saying really ugly things,” UDEFEGUA’s founder and director, Claudia Samayoa, told AJWS. “We documented it and asked the authorities to act because he was actually committing psychological violence, which is illegal according to our law.”

**Unwavering courage in the face of unrelenting threats**

By standing with the women during the trial, UDEFEGUA may have saved their lives: Dozens of human rights defenders are killed each year in Guatemala by those who wish to silence them.

UDEFEGUA and other advocates believe the assailants in many of these cases are hired by government officials or backers of development projects seeking to intimidate or remove those who stand in the way of their political or economic gain. AJWS’s grantees are among those at risk of such attacks, because they are often protesting the actions of powerful public figures or seeking to stop economic projects that fail to benefit—and often harm—rural communities. These dynamics make UDEFEGUA’s work not only difficult, but also dangerous.

“We are an institution that stands up to powerful, arrogant, corrupt and criminal actors who have verbally and physically attacked us … and even threatened our families,” said Claudia, who has survived five attempts on her life and was put on a hit list by a convicted criminal in 2014.

**A global reputation for advancing justice**

Despite the dangers, Claudia and UDEFEGUA staff refuse to abandon their work. Their critical contributions have garnered international admiration. Amnesty International and the United Nations’ refugee agency (UNHCR) have both praised the organization and, in 2013, the U.S.-based Guatemala Human Rights Commission honored UDEFEGUA with the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award.

In her acceptance speech, Claudia compared UDEFEGUA staff to emergency response workers. “We are firefighters, rushing to be present with human rights defenders in their moments of need.”

Since 2000, UDEFEGUA has responded to hundreds of human rights “fires” across Guatemala. AJWS looks forward to helping them extinguish or, better yet, prevent thousands more fires in the years to come.

**LOCATION:** Throughout Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador

**WEBSITE:** www.udefegua.org

**2015 ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET:** $539,000

**AJWS FUNDING HISTORY:** $18,000 to $86,000 annually since 2008, totaling $497,460

**OPPOSITE PAGE Survivors of sexual slavery during Guatemala’s civil war risked their lives to press charges against their abusers. AJWS grantee UDEFEGUA helped ensure their safety and security throughout the historic trial.**

**THIS PAGE UDEFEGUA’s founder and director, Claudia Samayoa (left), monitors proceedings at the Sepur Zarco trial with a colleague.**
Helping local communities obtain justice for bloodshed in the name of development.

In 1982, when the Guatemalan military massacred his wife and children and hundreds of other Maya Achi civilians to make way for the Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam, Carlos Chen Osorio vowed to seek justice. Justice for the murder of his family and thousands of other civilians. Justice for the destruction of his ancestral farmland, drowned by the dam’s floodwaters. Justice for the thousands of survivors—Carlos included—whom the military forced out of their homes and plunged into lasting poverty.

“The water is filled with the tears and blood of our people,” Carlos said.

With support from local and international allies like AJWS grantee Red Latinoamericana contra Represas y por los Ríos, sus Comunidades y el Agua (RedLAR), survivors like Carlos have spent decades advocating for reparations and official recognition of the killings. In the 1990s, they pushed Guatemala’s new government to exhume mass graves and investigate the crimes—a success that has allowed Maya Achi families to hold long delayed funerals for loved ones who disappeared during the massacres.

To achieve their goals, Carlos and other activists joined forces with RedLAR’s network of human rights advocates and other communities harmed by dam projects throughout Latin America, generating international attention for their story and putting pressure on the Guatemalan government to take action. Their efforts prompted the Inter-American Court on Human Rights to investigate the case—a major step forward for their cause.

In September of 2012, the activists’ tireless advocacy and organizing achieved a historic result: The Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Guatemalan government guilty of grave human rights violations against the people living near the Chixoy Dam site. Two years later, thanks to pressure from the court, former Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina publicly apologized to the survivors of the Chixoy massacres and promised more than $150 million in aid and reparations for their communities. Carlos and his peers are now working to make sure that the government makes good on this promise so that the communities of Maya Achi can prosper and the families of those massacred can obtain some measure of justice.
A youth network takes controversial stands in defense of sexual health and rights.

Flor Gonzalez never imagined that at the age of 27, she would be running a national organization advancing some of the most progressive agendas related to sexuality and health in her country. But when Rutilia Jiatz, director of a Guatemalan youth group in which Flor was involved, was hurt in a near-fatal car accident in 2013, Flor made a pledge that changed the course of her life.

“I sent Rutilia a text saying, ‘I’m not going to let the organization fail, I’ll take charge,’” Flor recalled. “That was a promise, and I felt committed.”

Three years later and good to her word, Flor is still with Red de Jóvenes para la Incidencia Política (Incide Joven), now serving as its director. An AJWS grantee since 2006, Incide Joven is empowering Guatemalan youth to become vocal advocates for social justice issues that affect their lives—especially the lack of information and services around issues of sexuality, pregnancy, abortion, sexually-transmitted diseases and gender-based violence.

“Last year, there were more than 60,000 recorded births to mothers between the ages of 10 and 19, including 5,000 births to mothers between 10 and 14,” Flor told AJWS in early 2016. According to Flor, these statistics typify the problems young people are facing in Guatemala, where birth control is taboo, abortion is illegal, 44 percent of women become mothers by the age of 20, and many youth lack information about their bodies—challenges Incide Joven works to tackle through a combination of education and advocacy.

Shedding light on sexual health for youth left in the dark

Members of Incide Joven believe that if young people are given access to comprehensive sexuality education and birth control, rates of a number of public health problems will fall, including sexually-transmitted diseases, early marriage, teenage pregnancy and maternal deaths resulting from unsafe abortions. But in a country where conservative Christian beliefs continue to dictate how people are—or are not—educated about sexual and reproductive health, the group has its work cut out for it.

Despite the challenges, in the 10 years since its founding, Incide Joven has made impressive strides in making sex ed accessible for young people nationwide by successfully advocating to Congress and the Ministries of Health and Education. Its youth network now reaches nine of the country’s 22 departments, where more than 100 Incide Joven-trained leaders bring potentially life-saving information about sexual health and rights directly to young people who need it.

“Parents can’t teach their kids sexual education because they never had it; teachers can’t because they never had it either,” explained Flor. Incide Joven fills the gap by supporting peer-to-peer outreach and education.

While members of Incide Joven are conducting their sex-positive outreach in communities, staff in Guatemala City are vigorously campaigning for the national government to make sexuality education standard in the classroom, and to pass legislation that creates greater access to birth control. They are up against powerful forces that oppose these progressive reforms—especially the Catholic Church and fundamentalist religious groups.

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20 Ospina, German A. “Why is Guatemala’s teen pregnancy rate so high?” Council on Hemispheric Affairs. 17 June 2015.
The battle of the bill
Incide Joven and the Catholic Church and its conservative religious allies are currently at odds over a Youth Bill pending before Guatemala’s Congress, which would create a national Youth Secretariat to deal with all issues affecting children and adolescents. Congress shelved the bill for a decade after previous attempts to pass it failed, but revived it in January 2016 thanks to intense advocacy by two of the youth groups that initially introduced it.

The reintroduction of the bill was a call to action for Incide Joven, as the draft failed to include sexuality education. The organization immediately mobilized allies, including those in the women’s movement, and formed a coalition of 44 groups to press for the bill’s passage and ensure that it would sufficiently meet the needs of youth vis-à-vis sexual health and rights. And they were heard: After a press conference where Incide Joven and its allies demanded revisions, Congress inserted language upholding science-based sexuality education into the document—a major advocacy victory.

Circumventing roadblocks
Incide Joven’s progress emboldened its opponents. Hearing news of the addition of sex ed, the Roman Catholic Church demanded that a “pro-life” anti-abortion statement be added to the document, as well. In response, Incide Joven and its allies are advocating vehemently against this addition. They are keeping up their pressure for a bill that will empower Guatemalan youth to have the information and agency they need to make informed decisions about their own sexuality and reproductive health.

Through a combination of verve and ingenuity, Incide Joven has overcome similar obstacles before. In 2008, following tireless advocacy by Incide Joven and like-minded groups, Guatemala’s Ministry of Education created an office on Gender and Cultural Diversity that would oversee sexuality education in schools. When the Catholic Church blocked the initiative, Incide Joven and its peers found a work-around. The groups convinced the national university to include the topic in its curriculum for training high school teachers, thereby equipping a generation of future educators with the information they need to help their young students lead safer, healthier lives.

Incide Joven members distribute educational materials on sexual and reproductive health and rights during an event in San Lucas Sacatepéquez, Sacatepéquez.
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ABOVE       Irma Micaela (left), her son José Esteban (middle) and Aura Choy (right) at their family home in Paguacal, Sololá. AJWS grantee CCDA taught the family to raise chickens and small crops for food and profit.

BACK COVER  Agriculture student Carlos Tum experiments with fertilizers at a CCDA greenhouse in Cerro de Oro, Sololá. Motivated by a desire to combat child malnutrition in Guatemala by helping small farmers, Carlos chose to do his university internship with CCDA.
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