



## Genocide Watch

The Alliance Against Genocide

### Guatemala Country Report

December 2020

Since the arrival of Spanish colonizers in 1534, Guatemala's indigenous population has endured centuries of racism and exploitation. Guatemala has eighteen million people. Forty-three percent belong to 23 Mayan groups. Fifty percent are "mestizo" (mixed) and six percent are of European descent.

In the 1870's, Guatemala's government confiscated huge swathes of Mayan land and sold it to the United Fruit Company. Mayans are now low wage plantation labor on what was once their own land. Mayans have little voice in politics, the economy, or in the judicial system.

In 1951, the democratically elected President of Guatemala, Jacobo Árbenz announced plans to redistribute land to 100,000 families. The United Fruit Company opposed the land redistribution. A CIA backed military coup d'état overthrew Árbenz. A series of military dictatorships followed. The Guatemalan military received counter-insurgency training from the CIA at the School for the Americas, and military equipment, including tanks and helicopters.

During the 1970-80's, the Guatemalan Army conducted an outright [genocide against the Mayan population](#). The U.S. supported the genocide, claiming that Marxist rebels threatened a communist takeover. Over 200,000 people were killed. Eighty-three percent of the victims were Mayans. A Historical Clarification Commission concluded that 93 percent were murdered by the Army and police death squads.

The bloodiest period of the genocide, known as 'The Silent Holocaust', occurred between 1982-83 under General Efraín Ríos Montt. The Guatemalan military and paramilitary [razed between 430-630 villages](#) and [killed over 200,000](#) Mayan peasants living in the highlands. 200,000 refugees fled into neighboring Mexico. One million Guatemalans were internally displaced. One million Guatemalan refugees fled to the USA.

Survivors' testimonies and the [Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala](#) have revealed that the Mayan population experienced severe dehumanization, mass executions, mass rape and torture. Indigenous activists, students, professors, trade unionists, religious leaders, journalists, and government opponents were also targeted.

Today, impunity in Guatemala remains high. Only a few low-level perpetrators received sentences in the years following the genocide. Hundreds of cases remain open.

Despite a [historic conviction](#) on May 10, 2013 which sentenced Ríos Montt to life in prison for genocide, the Ríos Montt appointed Supreme Court overturned the verdict on a technicality. Ríos Montt died during his re-trial.

After persistent [government denial](#), a unanimous [court ruling in 2018](#) acknowledged that the military carried out genocide against the Mayan people. Accountability remains out of reach [as prosecutors refuse to press charges](#) due to fear of military reprisals. [Journalists and indigenous rights defenders](#) are often "disappeared", arrested, or murdered.

During the Guatemalan Genocide all of the [Ten Stages of Genocide](#) were evident. Today Guatemala is at **Stages 3: Discrimination** and **8: Persecution** against Mayan people. Guatemalan leaders are at **Stage 10: Denial** due to failure to prosecute the architects and perpetrators of the Guatemalan genocide.

#### Genocide Watch recommends:

- Enforce Guatemalan and international laws against crimes against humanity, murder and genocide.
- Provide real protection for indigenous rights defenders and journalists.
- Fund organizations like the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala and the Centro Para la acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH) which work for accountability and the rule of law.
- Include indigenous languages in schools and offices in Mayan communities in Guatemala.

GENOCIDE WATCH is the founder and coordinator of the Alliance Against Genocide

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