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Guatemala: Land of injustice? Facts and Figures

Historical

Guatemala was ruled by Spain until 1823.

Internal armed conflict

Guatemala's internal armed conflict took place between 1960 and 1996.

The Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), Comisión de Clarificación Histórica, concluded that over 200,000 people had "disappeared" or were killed during the conflict.

Of the victims it could document and identify, 83 percent were of Mayan origin.

Around 93 percent of human rights violations were attributed to government forces.

Over a million Guatemalans were forcibly displaced. Approximately 200,000 of them found refuge in Mexico.

Peace Accords

Signed in 1996 between the guerrilla group, Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, and the government.

They provided a framework for resolving agrarian disputes and addressing the underlying causes of rural poverty, inequality in land distribution and exclusion of Mayan peoples from the political process.

A number of governments, including Spain, USA, Canada, Japan, Norway, Finland, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and the UK give aid for Guatemala to deliver on the commitments made in the Peace Accord.

Berger Administration

Former businessman and landowner Óscar Berger took office in 2004. Despite symbolically relaunching the Peace Accords on coming to power and committing to finding solutions to the land crisis in 2004, little progress has been made.

Between January and November 2004, 36 evictions took place, more than half of which were violent.

Land

Guatemala's main exports include coffee, sugar, bananas, fruit and vegetables.

In 2000, 1.5 per cent of the land owning population claimed ownership of 62.5 per cent of the land.

In December 2005, the governmental agency for solving land conflicts, Dependencia Presidencial de Asistencia Legal y Resolucion de Conflictos sobre Tierra (CONTIERRA), reported the existence of 1,052 cases of agrarian disputes – up from the 911 cases reported in October 2004.

Legislation

The definition of usurpation is so wide and unspecific that it can be used in nearly any situation involving a dispute related to land. Public prosecutors very frequently charge rural communities with the criminal offence of usurpation when they are protesting against the violation of their own rights.

Labour legislation stipulates that once made redundant workers have only 20 days to reclaim their labour entitlements. This is an extraordinarily short period of time and rural workers are often not informed of this obligation.

To date, there's no special tribunal to deal with land disputes. Although the Government has committed to creating special Agrarian Tribunals, to date the issues are dealt with in civil or more commonly and as preferred by the Public Prosecutor's Office, in criminal courts.

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