

Ambassador Stuart Savage
Embassy of Canada
Apartado Postal 400,
Guatemala, C.A.

June 24, 2014

Dear Ambassador Stuart Savage,

We are writing on behalf of the Americas Policy Group (APG) of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), a Canadian civil society group consisting of approximately 40 organizations, namely international development and humanitarian NGOs, human rights groups, labour unions, research institutions, as well as church and solidarity groups. The APG has a long history of working with civil society partners in Central America, monitoring the human rights situation and articulating joint policy on development, socio-economic issues and human rights in the region. The APG would like to bring to your attention some of the challenges facing Canadian human rights accompaniers working in Guatemala.

The APG and its member organizations are affiliated with, and support the work of, international human rights organizations and bodies operating in the Guatemala, including Peace Brigades International (PBI) and the international accompaniment coordinating body ACOGUATE. These organizations and bodies accompany human rights defenders who work on themes of justice and land rights. For instance, they directly accompanied the co-plaintiffs in the genocide case against Efraín Ríos Montt since its inception, and have provided accompaniment in other important cases in the struggle against impunity. They also provide accompaniment to community members facing repression in areas affected by mining, hydro-electric and other industries exploiting natural resources. Canadians have had a strong presence in accompaniment work in Guatemala.

Human rights accompaniment organizations such as PBI and those associated with ACOGUATE work as impartial human rights observers, who are in Guatemala to document and dissuade human rights abuses, providing support to Guatemalan human rights defenders only when requested.

Given that many Guatemalan human rights defenders are intimidated, threatened, and killed in their struggle to create a more just Guatemala, international accompaniment is crucial. This was emphasized by former Guatemalan Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz who noted that, "We have seen that the most effective way to ensure safety of the witnesses [of the genocide trial] has been through international accompaniment." This statement reiterates comments made by witnesses in the months and years leading up to the trial.

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International attention, including international accompaniment, is crucial due to the growing criminalization and repression faced by Guatemalan human rights defenders. The Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (UDEFEQUA) notes that 61 judicial complaints were mounted in “suspicious ways” against human rights defenders in 2013 and registered 657 attacks against human rights defender in 2013, up from 305 in 2012.

Unfortunately, international human rights accompaniment organizations and their Guatemalan counterparts have been subjected to defamatory statements, as well as defamation campaigns, which undermine their work and create concern over their safety. PBI, for instance, has been the target of a defamation campaign with regards to their accompaniment work in San Juan Sacatepéquez. Moreover, the Fundación Contra el Terrorismo has been behind defamation campaigns against Guatemalan activists and civil society organizations.

These defamation campaigns are legitimized by the comments of high-level Guatemalan officials. As an example, last September, Guatemala’s Minister of the Interior Lopez Bonilla indicated that foreigners who enter the country with tourist visas, but participate in social protests would be declared “non grata” and expelled from the country. He stated: “We are not going to permit their interference in internal affairs of Guatemala. We have to start to make ourselves respected, [we do not] allow that just anybody comes and slaps us in the face and does what they want.” President Otto Perez Molina has likewise made disparaging insinuations against human rights organizations in Guatemala, referring to them in his inauguration speech as groups that “refuse to let go of the past,” and instead appear “to be making a living off of it and continue to receive international support in some cases.”

Such derogatory statements and defamation campaigns mischaracterize the important work of international human rights accompaniment organizations. They serve to deflect scrutiny from the international community about the troubling situation in Guatemala, as well as the ongoing work of Guatemalan human rights defenders, exacerbating the challenge of impunity in the country.

The APG calls for the Canadian Embassy in Guatemala to publicly express support for the work of international human rights observers in Guatemala, recognizing that this work contributes to the creation of a safer space for Guatemalan human rights defenders to work and, in the long-term, more secure and democratic conditions in the country, as well as globally. As Canada’s *Strategy for Engagement in the Americas* notes, “Insecurity in the Americas threatens stability, democracy and prosperity in the hemisphere and at the same time has a direct impact on Canada and Canadians.”

In the past, the Canadian Embassy in Guatemala has expressed support for the work of human rights and international accompaniment organizations in a variety of ways including by

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providing letters of support to Canadian human rights accompaniers, which were useful. Given the current context facing international observers and human rights defenders in Guatemala, clear expressions of support by the Canadian embassy are all the more important. We also request that you meet with members of ACOGUATE and PBI personally to outline these issues in more details. APG members, who are regularly in Guatemala, would be eager to meet with you to discuss these matters, as well.

In January 2014, Canada became chair of the G13 Group of Donors, whose goal it is to “support Guatemala in its development, so it can become an equitable society, achieve sustainable economic growth, as well as the rule of law.” We call upon the Government of Canada to exercise leadership in the G13 by initiating a high-level dialogue with the Guatemalan state on this crucial issue.

We appreciate your consideration of these issues, and look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,

Bill Fairbairn
Co-chair, Americas Policy Group

Tara Ward,
Co-chair, Americas Policy Group

CC: John Baird, P.C., MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of Canada
Paul Dewar, MP, Foreign Affairs Critic, New Democratic Party of Canada
Wayne Marston, MP, Human Rights Critic, New Democratic Party of Canada
Marc Garneau, MP, Foreign Affairs Critic, Liberal Party of Canada
Irwin Cotler, MP, Rights and Freedoms Critic, Liberal Party of Canada
Jean-François Fortin, MP, Foreign Affairs Critic, Bloc Québécois