



ALERTA ROJA



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ALERTA NARANJA



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ALERTA AMARILLA



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SISTEMA ALERTAS COVID-19
<http://sistemaalertacovid-19.segeplan.gob.gt/>

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Covid-19 and Civic and Democratic Space

GUATEMALA

Accountability, corruption and impunity are long-standing issues in Guatemala, contributing to high levels of poverty and inadequate provision of public services, including healthcare.

On 5 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which allowed it to restrict certain rights and purchase goods and services without the bidding process normally required by law. To slow the spread of the virus, the government imposed a curfew, prohibited public gatherings, closed non-essential businesses and educational institutions, shut borders and stopped public transport services, among other measures. Some measures were relaxed in July 2020 while the state of emergency expired on 30 September 2020.

States of "siege" and "prevention", which grant additional powers to police and other authorities, were also declared in mid-2020 in provinces affected by conflicts over land and resources, leading to militarisation in areas with indigenous and peasant populations.¹

FACTS AND FIGURES



Between March and September 2020,

40,203 people,

including 536 children, were arrested for violating a Covid-19 curfew.²



The Association of Journalists of Guatemala

documented **149 acts of aggression against or restrictions on journalists** in 2020,

including harassment, threats, physical assaults, cyberattacks and three murders.³

"Traffic light" map reflecting the alert level in the country as of April 30, 2021.



From January to November 2020, **90,936**

pregnancies were registered in girls aged 10-19 years, amid an increase in gender-based violence.⁴



Guatemala increased its indebtedness by

USD 1,044 million through emergency loans from the IMF, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank to address the pandemic.

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF COVID-19 MEASURES

Freedom of Expression and Right to Information

Journalists came under increased attack during the pandemic, including threats, theft, arrests, surveillance, harassment, physical assaults and murder. In an open letter published on 12 April 2020, over 100 journalists and human rights organisations in Guatemala challenged government censorship, obstacles to accessing information and intimidation since the start of the pandemic.⁵ Reporter Junior Cordero complained that on 14 April 2020 police forced him to delete photos and videos he had taken of a man being arrested for violating a Covid-19 curfew in Malacatán, San Marcos.⁶ On 23 June 2020, soldiers threatened journalist Juan Carlos Boton after he took photos of five soldiers not wearing masks in Quiché.⁷ Police filmed and searched Sonny Figueroa and Marvin Del Cid, who were investigating allegations of corruption against government officials, in May 2020 near the Presidential Palace in Guatemala City.⁸ Figueroa was later arrested in September 2020 when he sought help from police after his equipment was stolen.⁹

Access to information about the Covid-19 pandemic was limited in Guatemala. In early April 2020, the government stopped providing detailed information about the spread of the virus and later removed several journalists from a WhatsApp chat which had been their only way to receive direct updates from the authorities.¹⁰ On 13 June 2020, Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsperson criticised delayed and incomplete responses by the Ministry of Health to requests for information about the pandemic.¹¹

“Access to information goes hand in hand with freedom of expression. Since the beginning of the pandemic, government authorities (central and local governments) have restricted and controlled access to information, especially that related to the health emergency.” – **Ruth del Valle, human rights defender at Human Rights Defenders and Journalists of the Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office**

Protection Of Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders in Guatemala, especially those defending land and the environment, faced increased violence, harassment and criminalisation in 2020. The Unit for Protection of Human Rights Defenders of Guatemala (UDEFEQUA) documented 1,004 attacks on HRDs by 15 December 2020, an increase on previous years' figures.¹²

On 6 June 2020, Mayan scientist Domingo Choc Ché was burned to death after being accused of witchcraft in San Luis, Petén.¹³ On 15 June 2020, indigenous land defender Medardo Alonzo Lucero, a member of the Maya Chorti Indigenous Council of Olopa and active in their resistance to mining, was found dead and displaying signs of torture in Olopa, Chiquimula. Mayan Q'eqchi translator and indigenous land defender María Cuc Choc was prosecuted and placed under house arrest after her work opposing nickel mining in Lake Izabal.¹⁴

Women and Young Girls

Violence against women and girls was already widespread in Guatemala and was exacerbated by restrictions on movement and reduced access to services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Women in rural areas and indigenous women faced barriers to seeking help, including the lack of support staff who speak indigenous languages.¹⁵

Freedom of Movement and Migrants

In mid-March 2020, the government imposed a 12-hour curfew between 16:00 and 04:00, later reduced to 10 hours, in response to the pandemic. By September 2020, police had arrested 40,203 people, including 536 children, for violating the curfew, raising concerns of over-crowding in detention facilities where Covid-19 can easily spread. The Human Rights Ombudsperson also spoke out against excessive use of force by police during arrests.¹⁶

Migrants travelling to the USA were blocked and expelled from Guatemala on Covid-19 grounds. In early October 2020, authorities in Guatemala stopped 3,300 Honduran migrants on their way to Mexico and the USA and sent them back to the Honduran border, claiming that they were a health risk.¹⁷ Guatemalan migrants deported from the USA and Mexico were stigmatised as carriers of the Covid-19 virus after some deportees tested positive.¹⁸

Economic and Social Rights

Pre-existing conditions of hunger and poverty were exacerbated by the pandemic, in part due to restrictions on movement which stopped many people from working. The World Food Programme reported that the pandemic almost doubled the number of people facing severe food insecurity in Guatemala.¹⁹

The closure of schools and shift to online learning increased the childcare burden on women and curtailed access to education for children and young people living in poverty. Sixty-nine per cent of Guatemalans surveyed in the 2018 National Census do not have access to the internet.²⁰

Even before the pandemic, Guatemala's health system was unable to meet the needs of the population due to the privatisation of social services and lack of resources. Serious issues in healthcare were reported during the pandemic, including the hospitalisation of patients with only mild symptoms, which caused undue strain on resources and inadequate equipment and staff.²¹ Health workers spoke out against insufficient personal protective equipment and the non-payment or delayed payment of their salaries, despite retaliation by the authorities.²²

The government announced emergency funds to support poor and low-income Guatemalans, including electricity subsidies, cash transfers and salary subsidies. But by late October 2020, only three ministries had spent at least half of the emergency funds assigned.²³ The Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies (ICEFI) warned of a lack of transparency regarding these social assistance programs.²⁴

“...what is happening in Guatemala is the taking advantage of the situation caused by Covid-19, to benefit of a corrupt elite that compromises the human and economic-social rights of present and future generations through decisions imposed within the legislative branch and that are projected to the entire Guatemalan State.” - **Jorge Santos, UDEFEGUA**

NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Guatemala government should:

- urgently intensify efforts to address food insecurity and hunger and, in the medium and long term, strengthen peasant economies as part of a development and food security strategies;
- ensure that media workers and human rights defenders can carry out their functions without threats, harassment, violence or intimidation, and are not prosecuted for their legitimate work;
- increase the public budget by 5% over the next 5 years, including doubling investment in public services, and make the execution of the budget more transparent. To facilitate this, corruption must be eliminated and tax collection made more progressive, increased and improved; and
- ensure any restrictions on rights for public health reasons are lawful, necessary, and proportionate. They must be based on scientific evidence, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in application, of limited duration and formulated narrowly and precisely.

Endnotes

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