

## News Release

--For immediate release--

### **Over 40 Nobel Laureates say Guatemala faces a crisis in democracy & human rights**

(Ottawa, April 4, 2019.) A democratic crisis is deepening in Guatemala, with human rights and rule of law increasingly under assault. Forty-four Nobel laureates, alarmed by the growing and dangerous disregard for justice, issued an open statement urging Guatemalan authorities to safeguard peace and democracy in Guatemala.

“Guatemala’s progress in recent years in tackling corruption and impunity for crimes against humanity was being led by courageous state prosecutors, judges, civil society organizations and human rights defenders, including women survivors of sexual violence,” said Nobel Peace Laureate Jody Williams. “Now these same people are facing a huge backlash, and need the international community’s support.”

Freedom of expression and association is being curtailed, and human rights work is being criminalized. Last week in Guatemala, nine civil society organizations came together to denounce the criminalization of respected human rights leaders in Guatemala, including Claudia Samayoa, founder and coordinator of **Unidad de Protección de Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos Guatemala - UDEFEGUA** (Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit in Guatemala).

In 2018 alone, 26 human rights defenders in Guatemala—most of them Indigenous activists— were killed. Between 2015 and 2016, there were 231 attacks registered against women human rights defenders.

“The Laureate’s open statement exposes the main risks facing Guatemala as authorities break the rule of law,” says Iduvina Hernández, a human rights activist who is part of *la Convergencia de Derechos humanos*, the group of nine civil society organizations that last month denounced the criminalization of human rights defenders. “Guatemala needs voices for peace, to return to the path of democracy and the rule of law.”

Since the 1996 Peace Accords, Guatemala has achieved remarkable advances in the fight against impunity by prosecuting those responsible for disappearances, rape and massacres committed during the 36-year civil war. But many of those advances are now under threat.

Guatemala’s Congress recently tried to pass a bill that would amend the National Reconciliation Law, granting amnesty and setting free those convicted of perpetrating some of the worst crimes during the armed conflict. The Laureates, in their statement, said that an amnesty for the perpetrators of crimes against humanity would “leave survivors vulnerable to further violence, and denigrate the dignity of the victims in their struggle for the pursuit of justice.”

President Morales terminated the mandate of the UN-backed Commission against Impunity (CICIG). The Commission was tasked with carrying out independent investigations into corruption and criminal groups with ties to state institutions. Despite the fact that the Guatemalan Constitutional Court

subsequently voted to maintain the Commission, Commissioner Iván Velásquez Gómez and his team were not allowed to re-enter Guatemala after leaving the country for travel.

In the open statement, the Laureates said that ignoring the decision of the Constitutional Court “sets a dangerous precedent for Guatemala, and deeply compromises the independence of the judiciary, a cornerstone for peace and democracy.”

The Laureates are calling on the State of Guatemala to:

- Guarantee the rule of law, by respecting the judicial independence of the Constitutional Court and of all democratic institutions;
- Reinstate the Commission against Impunity and allow it to operate fully and independently;
- Guarantee the freedom of expression, opinion, peaceful assembly and association and the full protection for victims of human rights violations and human rights defenders, particularly those from Indigenous communities; and
- Veto any further attempts to restore impunity through amendments to the National Reconciliation Law.

Signatories to the statement include 44 Nobel Laureates from a range of disciplines: peace, literature, medicine, economics, physics and chemistry.

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