

Hungry for peace



The high rates of corruption, insecurity and violence; the low levels of state investment in education, health and social security; insecurity about food; the devaluation of life and the denial of human rights; the slowness of the legal system; all these factors contribute to the insecurity affecting the people of Guatemala. The recently elected Grand National Alliance Government represents an opportunity to attain a real democracy that will foster and guarantee the security of the people.

INIAP - Iniciativa Social

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To work for people's security is to help men, women and children in all the cities and villages in the world make an improvement in their lives. It is to protect people and their rights, a task which is at the core of international peace. Human security, then, must be seen as an integral concept based on objectives that include the elimination of poverty, access to basic education and health care, the protection of children, the promotion and defence of human rights, and the preservation and conservation of the environment.

Seen in this context, Guatemala has serious shortcomings which variously show weaknesses in the rule of law, the prevalence of structures of domination that cling to the traditionally established social and economic order, economic and social inequities, and high levels of corruption and impunity.

Hospitals do not have medicines, social security does not function, State security forces have such a shortage of resources that detainees are allowed to escape from detention centres, and there is a culture of impunity that is reflected in the lack of sanctions against corrupt public officials. All of this is daily fare for the people of Guatemala.

A consensus for peace

To these economic, political, social and cultural inequities, which are also the basis for the discrimination and exclusion that prevails in the national sphere, and which are sources of personal insecurity, can be added the growing presence of drug trafficking,¹ which generates parallel structures that act within and under the protection of State power.

Democracy has been reduced to just its formal aspects which are manifested in electoral processes every four years. The political parties

(which should be acting as intermediaries between society and the State) reactivate their machinery for the elections but afterwards disappear from the national scene, or at least that is what has happened up to now.

These structural defects mean that in Guatemala insecurity has become a great limitation to the freedom of the individual and social coexistence. In January 2004, the Grand National Alliance, a coalition of minority parties on the Right, assumed power under President Oscar Berger Perdomo, who in his campaign proposed a plan for citizen security structured around an integral short, medium and long term vision. The Government now has to confront these great challenges facing the Guatemalan people, who are struggling to achieve the goals of development as a basis for achieving human security.

The 1996 Peace Accords between the representatives of the guerrillas and the Government constitute a valid agenda for progress towards development and democratisation in Guatemala. There is a nationwide consensus that they must be implemented. It is the State, the Government in co-ordination with civil society, that has to guarantee and push through the application of these agreements, and at the same time generate initiatives and actions to improve the conditions and quality of people's lives, and thus make real progress towards the construction of national peace.

The dimensions of insecurity

The 11,237,196 people who make up the Guatemalan population belong to 22 different indigenous groups, and most of them live in poverty: 54.3% of the population are poor, and 22.8% are extremely poor.² Life expectancy is around 66 years, public spending on education is 1.7% of the GDP, the literacy rate is 60%, and unemployment and under-employment levels have been rising.

The economy is based on the exploitation and export of agricultural products. The 2001 coffee crisis drove many coffee estates into bankruptcy, and thousands of agricultural workers were left unemployed. While tourism and industry generate an important but not majority share of national income, the cash remittances that Guatemalans liv-

ing and working in the United States send back to their families represent a significant contribution to the country's economy.³

Agriculture is the main source of employment for the economically active population (38.4%). Although small-scale farming is on the rise (18.6%), a high proportion of the ownership of arable land (62.5%) is concentrated in the hands of an economically powerful sector and so people are forced to rent land to cultivate. The proportion of rural homes with property attached has fallen from 65% to 52%, and rented land has increased from 12% to 19%.⁴

Some 60% of homes in the country do not have the capacity to earn half the cost of their minimum food needs despite spending the greater part of their earnings on it.⁵ This is why Guatemala has the highest rates of chronic malnutrition in Latin America and one of the highest in the world.⁶

Human rights in jeopardy

Today the country is in a post-armed conflict situation. In 1996, after long negotiations, President Álvaro Arzú's Government signed peace agreements with the old guerrilla movement, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, putting an end to a bloody internal war that had lasted 36 years (1960-1996). Berger, the new president, has made a commitment to organisations and leading figures from civil society to include in his work team "a number of people who promoted and subscribed to the 1996 peace agreements" as the best guarantee that those agreements will be kept.

However, there is a lot more to be done in the area of human rights, respect for which has deteriorated in recent years.⁷ The initial impulse to reform crucial institutions (the police, the Public Ministry and the judiciary)⁸ has become bogged down

1 It is estimated that half the cocaine transported along the Central American corridor to Mexico and the United States - some 400 tons per year - goes through Guatemala. In addition, agents from the Department of Anti-Narcotics Operations were involved in big scandals including the theft of confiscated drugs, torture and murder, before this unit was dismantled in October 2002. The number of drug traffic-related arrests rose from 189 in 1996 to 5,917 in 2002. US Department of State, *Narcotics Control Report*, www.state.gov/g/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2002/html/17941.htm

2 The XI Population Census and VI Housing Census, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics.

3 In 2002 remittances totalled USD 1,319,780,000. World Development Indicators, www.worldbank.com

4 World Food Programme Report 2002.

5 *Ibid.*

6 UNICEF has identified 75,000 children suffering from severe malnutrition and also says that 67% of indigenous children suffer from chronic malnutrition.

7 See the 14th Report on Human Rights from the United Nations verification mission to Guatemala. November 2003.

8 Violations of rights by the police have increased, and impunity is the norm in the justice system.

before any changes could be consolidated. An obstacle impeding these institutional reforms from being carried through is their precarious financing.

Although the political system is competitive, political parties and Congress remain weak. The independent press has become stronger, but there are still problems in that members of the press have been threatened and intimidated because of their reports on human rights and government corruption. Some social communicators were even killed after following up subjects closely linked with big economic interests.⁹

The rising death toll

Threats to personal safety make social coexistence difficult and compromise individual freedom. The homicide rate (a very precise indicator of insecurity) increased in recent years from 27 to 32.3 per 100,000 people in 2002.¹⁰ There are various reasons for this worsening situation: the authoritarian culture, poverty and inequality, the growing power of organised crime, and the inefficacy of the State in its duty to maintain law and order.

MINUGUA, the United Nations mission established in 1994 to verify compliance with the Global Agreement on Human Rights in Guatemala, reports that between July 2001 and June 2002 there were 57 incidents involving the attempted lynching of 139 people, 21 of whom died. Most of these lynchings took place in the west of the country where the internal armed conflict was most intense. These episodes are evidence that the justice system is inoperative and the State is absent from the local arena.

Against corruption

Guatemala ranks 100th in the Transparency International index of corruption. During the previous administration, the media uncovered cases of large-scale embezzlement in state organisations such as the Guatemalan Social Security Institute and the Ministry of the Interior, in which GTQ 90 million (USD 11 million) were stolen. While corruption also went on under other administrations, it became more widespread under Alfonso Portillo Cabrera

(2000-2003), although his was the only government to try and imprison top public officials for graft.

The creation by the Government of a National Commission for Transparency and Against Corruption¹¹ aimed to help eradicate ongoing corrupt practices in the public as well as the private and social sectors, but the Commission's performance was low-key because it became politicised. Nevertheless it is still in existence thanks to international support and co-operation.¹²

Government commitments

The central Government has identified the main factors that stand in the way of human development, and has implemented strategies aimed at mitigating the country's major social, economic, political and cultural problems. Examples of this are the passing of the Urban and Rural Development Councils Law and the General Decentralisation Law and the changes made to the Municipal Code,¹³ promoting decentralisation and establishing a role for society in monitoring public affairs.

The Presidential Planning and Programming Secretariat - set up in 2001 with the objective of formulating, evaluating and monitoring social and population development policy - was assigned the task of preparing a poverty reduction strategy, as well as specific strategies at departmental and municipal levels within the framework of the Urban and Rural Development Councils.

Besides this, the National Council of Food and Nutritional Security was set up to pool resources to be channelled to those departments and municipalities most in need; 102 municipalities with problems of malnutrition, hunger and extreme poverty (out of a total of 331 municipalities) were identified.

With the aim of improving the quality of life for small farmers, for the third year running the central Government implemented the fertilizer programme that allows farmers to buy this input below normal market prices.

An educational reform programme has been implemented, providing wider coverage and bringing the curriculum up to date. The National Literacy Programme received considerable support from the central Government and from the Ministry of Edu-

cation, and the National Literacy Commission was set up, which has received international support and cooperation.

In the field of health, a vaccination programme for children from 0 to 5 years was created and the Programme for the Availability of Medicines has promoted the sale of generic medicines.

Conclusions

The coming to power of the new Government in January 2004 has fuelled new hope among the Guatemalan people, who are demanding that the new authorities ensure that the justice system function properly in order to create a feeling of security in the legal, social, food, political and economic fields. People are concerned about corruption in the public administration, and they are demanding much-needed transparency from the authorities in the management of public resources. Accountability, as an instrument of citizen control, is at the top of the agenda in Guatemalan society.

Today, Guatemalans resent the fact that their democratic system is so fragile. Although the authorities change every four years, and although some measures have been taken to support some aspects of human development, there still remain to be solved deep-rooted problems like unemployment, personal insecurity, corruption, the increase in organised crime and drug trafficking, and the scant attention to basic services like education and health. Together these constitute a series of flagrant personal, environmental, sanitary, food and economic threats to human security. ■

9 Threats against journalists and defenders of human rights from a mysterious group called "Guatemaltecos de Verdad" (True Guatemalans) show that acts committed by the army and paramilitary groups during the civil war (1960-1996) are still a subject that is not merely delicate but actually dangerous. The same goes for people investigating cases of corruption. According to the 2003 Reporters Without Borders annual report, the threats and the fiscal and judicial harassment which the independent press is subjected to have gone as far as the kidnapping and murder of journalists. www.rsf.fr/article.php3?id_article=6217

10 National Centre for Economic Research. *Study on the extent and cost of the violence in Guatemala*. Guatemala, May 2002.

11 Government of Guatemala. *Third Government Report to the Congress of the Republic*, 14 January 2003.

12 The words of Peter Eigen, President of Transparency International, explain this policy of co-operation, "Rich countries must give practical help to governments in developing countries which show the political will to fight corruption. Those countries with a high level of corruption should not be penalised since they urgently need help." *Index of Perceptions of Corruption 2003*, London, October 2003.

13 These came into force on 12 March 2002, 11 April 2002 and 1 July 2002, respectively.