

## Statement Supporting UDEFEGUA Director Jorge Santos

We, the undersigned organizations, express our respect and unconditional support for Jorge Santos, director of the Guatemalan human rights organization UDEFEGUA.

The repression in Guatemala has become world news. The maneuvering to stifle opponents of government corruption and impunity has been dramatic, systematic, and increasingly bold. The campaign to silence those working for justice has targeted different segments of society and now has reached the NGO sector, with accusations against one of Guatemala's most prominent human rights defenders.

During the government of President Alejandro Giammattei, more than 30 prosecutors and judges have fled into exile, including those in charge of prosecuting cases related to genocide and other war crimes. Former head of the Special Prosecutor's Office in Quetzaltenango, Virginia Laparra, has been imprisoned for more than a year; Amnesty International considers her a [prisoner of conscience](#). Orlando López, who prosecuted former dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide, was arrested in March on trumped-up charges. The campaign against high-level prosecutors began in earnest when Giammattei was facing [investigation](#) in two separate cases, one related to the acceptance of bribes and the other to the illegal financing of electoral campaigns. What began as a campaign to intimidate and falsely prosecute honorable anti-corruption prosecutors and judges expanded last year to incorporate one of the country's leading investigative journalists. Rubén Zamora, founder and editor of the newspaper *El Periódico*, has been imprisoned for ten months and subjected to a judicial process plagued by aberrations and violations of due process.

Given its prominence and importance, it is not surprising that UDEFEGUA has emerged as a target in this context. UDEFEGUA—the Unit for the Protection of Rights Defenders—is one of Guatemala's most prominent human rights organizations and, for the past 23 years, has documented, investigated, and kept statistics on attacks against human rights defenders. These defenders include journalists, judges, lawyers, community leaders, Indigenous, environmental and land defenders, and others working to defend rights. UDEFEGUA's annual reports are cited by the US State Department, the United Nations, the European Parliament and other decision-making bodies. The organization also assists human rights defenders under attack. Presenting its most recent annual report in March 2023, UDEFEGUA marked a tripling in the number of attacks against human rights defenders from 2021 to 2022. UDEFEGUA has worked against this upward trend in attacks, pressing for a public policy to protect human rights defenders. Such a policy was ordered by the Inter-American Court in 2014, but was never completed or implemented by the Guatemalan government.

Leading the charge against Santos and many others who fight for justice, human rights, and transparency is Engel List member Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, who presides over the so-called Foundation Against Terrorism. As in many other cases, Méndez Ruiz is a co-plaintiff in the case against Zamora. Méndez Ruiz's attacks are abetted by the Attorney General's Office and the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity, both headed by members of the Engel List, a grouping of individuals designated by the US State Department as corrupt. As an example of the

nature of such attacks, the Swiss ambassador to Guatemala, Roger Denzer, has been threatened with a formal protest by Méndez Ruiz, simply for sending an embassy representative to observe a trial involving a Swiss citizen. For performing this normal diplomatic duty, the ambassador has been accused by Méndez Ruiz of influence peddling and obstruction of justice.

The persecution against Jorge Santos is occurring in an atmosphere of rapidly closing civic space. Reporting on human rights violations and acts of corruption is increasingly fraught with peril. Since 2021, 22 journalists have fled the country. Even basic democratic norms are waning. Three presidential candidates have been barred from running in Guatemala's upcoming elections. Guatemala has refused to allow a visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which in its annual reports for the last two years has categorized Guatemala as a serious human rights violator.

The international community must act, using all the tools at its disposal. These include voting against loans to Guatemala in multilateral lending institutions, canceling the proposed [investment initiative](#) announced by US government officials in recent months, suspending Development Finance Corporation support for projects in Guatemala, and withholding aid of any sort to a military and police force increasingly used to silence dissent. These strategies are small steps to take compared to the magnitude of the repression, its calculated efficiency, and the irreparable damage to Guatemalan society it is causing as institution after institution is taken apart or taken over by those favoring impunity.

We will continue to fight for a Guatemala where everyone can live and exercise their rights. We offer our full support, admiration, and respect to Jorge Santos, to UDEFEGUA and to all those who fight for justice and human rights. For any harm that befalls Jorge Santos or his family, we hold the Guatemalan government, which has a duty to protect its citizens, fully responsible.

Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA  
Chicago Religious Leadership Network (CRLN)  
Latin America Working Group  
Witness at the Border  
Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala  
Movimiento de Trabajadores y Campesinos, MTC, San Marcos  
American Jewish World Service  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns  
Protection International Mesoamérica  
The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)  
ARTICLE 19 Oficina para México y Centroamérica  
Red por la Paz y el Desarrollo de Guatemala  
Guatemalanetz Bern, Suiza  
Decolonized International Solidarity Network-Canada  
New Hampshire Vermont Guatemala Accompaniment Project  
Asociación para una Ciudadanía Participativa (ACI PARTICIPA)

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Collectif Guatemala

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)

Justice in Motion

Center for Gender & Refugee Studies

ActionAid USA

Alianzas of Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington (Virginia)