



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Defending Community and Indigenous Rights in Guatemala

**Friday, October 23rd, 2015
11:00 AM – 12:00 Noon
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks

Good morning. On behalf of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I would like to welcome you to our briefing this morning on defending community and indigenous rights in Guatemala. I especially want to welcome and recognize Oxfam for its accompaniment and advocacy on behalf of rural communities in Central America and around the world. And as always, I thank the Commission staff for organizing this event.

Guatemala is facing a critical juncture. Over the last year revelations of massive and shameless looting of the state by high level officials in the government, the legislature and political parties sparked a remarkable citizen mobilization. People of all ages from all ethnic and religious groups, students and civil society organizations came together with a common agenda against corruption and in favor of reform. Armed with evidence generated by the investigations of the Attorney General and the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG, this citizen movement forced the resignation of President Otto Perez Molina in September – an unprecedented victory. Now the transition government must manage the upcoming run-off election for a new president, and political leaders are on notice that they need to move forward with fundamental reforms to electoral, judicial, civil service and procurement systems in order to begin to restore citizen confidence in government.

But even as there is movement on the political front, urgently needed social and economic transformations have yet to advance. Guatemala is among the Latin American countries with the highest levels of inequality, poverty and chronic malnutrition. More than half

the population lives in poverty; in rural areas, eight out of ten people are poor. The country has the fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition in the world; in indigenous areas chronic undernutrition approaches 70 percent. Nationwide, the chronic undernutrition rate for children is nearly 50 percent.

With figures like these, it's not surprising that the country's "development" model has been called into question. Conflicts over land and natural resources are widespread as incursions by mining and agribusiness companies have displaced communities, increased food insecurity and led to human rights abuses. Those who defend their communities are subject to harassment and criminalization. Victims of human rights violations are often denied justice.

Today we are joined by two well-known civil society leaders who will discuss the challenges they face as they try to defend the rights of people in their communities to live a dignified life. Daniel Pascual is a community leader of indigenous heritage who engaged in the negotiation and subsequent monitoring of the 1996 Peace Accords and today is the national coordinator of the Committee of Campesino Unity, CUC. Rafael Maldonado is a lawyer and environmental activist at the Center for Legal, Environmental and Social Action, CALAS, who represents communities seeking to defend their land and resources. He also represents human rights defenders who have been criminalized for their activism. I'd like to express my appreciation to Daniel and Rafael for joining us today and for their long-standing commitment to social and economic justice in their country.

Thanks again for being here, and I turn the mic over to Stephanie Burgos of Oxfam, who will moderate this morning.