

Climate Migration, Dispossession, and Persecution: Stories of Guatemalan Asylum Seekers as Environmental and Human Rights Defenders¹

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Latin America is the most dangerous region in the world for environmental activists and land defenders. According to the international organization, Global Witness in its report [Defending Tomorrow. The Climate Crisis and Threats against Land and Environmental Defenders](#), in 2019 alone, 212 murders of environmental activists and land defenders were registered globally, an average of more than four people a week. Over two-thirds of killing, that is 148 murders, took place in Latin America and 12 in Guatemala. Concerning the number of murders, Guatemala ranks sixth place globally on the most dangerous countries for these defenders, and is the fourth most dangerous country per capita, with Honduras, Colombia, and Nicaragua ranking the first three places. A relevant fact to notice in this report is that the indigenous people are at a disproportionate risk of reprisals and are some of the most at-risk communities across the globe. In Guatemala, the indigenous population constitutes around 40% of its population.

The layers that connect climate migration, dispossession, and political persecution are not easy to unravel. I started to notice it through my work as an activist and scholar in migration studies, in particular Central American migration through the Corridor Central America-Mexico-the US. While it is true that Central American migration through Mexico has been constant for more than four decades, the forms, dynamics, configurations of migratory flows, and the government responses have varied over the years. Even the causes of displacement have varied, and in recent years the factors that drive the decision to migrate have become more complex, intersectional, and historically connected to past experiences of dispossession and persecution.

I met Francisco and Gaspar² in November 2019 through a great colleague and advocate for the human rights of migrants and refugees. Francisco and Gaspar fled Guatemala in June 2019. It took them 20 days to arrive at the border with the US where they surrendered to US authorities in order to start a political asylum claim based on persecution in their home country. When they did so, they were sent back to wait out their process in Mexico, where they were previously robbed and threatened by local police and held by human smugglers and members of organized crime that operates in the area. Francisco and Gaspar have been subjected to the [Migrant Protection Protocols \(MPP\)](#), in which asylum seekers are given the notice to appear for their immigration court hearing and returned to Mexico until their hearing date. According to [Human Rights First](#) as for May 13, 2020, there have been at least 1,114 publicly reported cases of murder, rape, torture, kidnapping, and other violent assaults against asylum seekers and

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² I conducted in-depth interviews with Gaspar and Francisco as part of the Student Award. I did not use pseudonyms because part of Francisco's and Gaspar's strategy has been to make their cases visible which can help in their asylum case in the US and can also help protect their communities back home.

migrants forced to return to Mexico. Francisco and Gaspar have been in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, for more than a year waiting for their hearing to happen.

Francisco and Gaspar are internationally recognized human rights activists and Maya-Ixil indigenous people who suffered persecution at the hands of the Guatemalan military. Francisco is a genocide survivor: “I am a survivor of the massacres that the Guatemalan army led. The Guatemalan army was massacring communities, killing leaders, until it exterminated the community of indigenous people”. In 1982, when Francisco was 6 years old, he survived the massacre of 32 Maya-Ixils during an army raid in his village. Francisco recalled joining his father to pick up the bodies and bury them. After that, he and his family realized that they could not stay, “we left my community but all the communities around had lurked. When my father took us to the mountains, we were captured, and there was when my father was annihilated”. Francisco and his younger 3 years old sister were taken to a military base where he witnessed how people were tortured and then killed. “There were around 70 children just like me that survived the same I did. Many of them were given in adoption”. Francisco and her sister were saved by a group of religious priests and nuns that opened an orphanage. Thanks to that, her mother was able to reach them after six years of being separated by the Guatemalan army the day they were captured and they killed Francisco’s father.

Gaspar, on the other side, is a young environmental activist and human rights defender: “I belong to the Maya Ixil indigenous people, one of the populations that were almost exterminated during the Guatemalan armed conflict”. He mentioned that there were 114 massacres registered around his community, but the [Guatemala Memory of Silence, a report by the Commission for Historical Clarification](#) counted at least 334 massacres in the El Quiché department, which is where Gaspar’s and Francisco’s communities are located. Gaspar continues: “Fortunately, I am one of the young people in my community who had the opportunity to study, not at such a high academic level, because we as indigenous peoples, we have been historically marginalized”. Gaspar also mentions that since he was little, he learned the value of respect, “as I was growing up, I was really understanding the value of nature and the value of human life. So this is how I started to get involved in the fight to defend the territory, and also in the fight to defend human rights”.

Connecting the dots between dispossession, political persecution and climate migration

Gaspar and Francisco along with their communities have learned from several experiences of dispossession and persecution, the need to defend their land, and how to leverage the power of social organization within their communities. Before the war, Francisco and his family had their own piece of land along with others in his community, but their land was stripped from them during the war. The same happened to Gaspar’s family: “my dad lost a lot of his land during that time.” During the war, an important part of the Guatemalan government counterinsurgency program was the development pole settlements in which people displaced by violence came to live in concentrated villages where they could be controlled and supervised by Armed Civilian Patrols and the Military forces and therefore avoid guerrilla incursions. In fact, Gaspar was born in one of the “development poles” villages that were established in the Ixil region.

Francisco recounts the time that he encountered people from his community after returning there with his mom and sister. They recognized that they were all genocide survivors: “We were talking about our needs, in the sense that we almost had nothing by then”. Francisco’s community and the five neighboring communities constitute an organization called “Committee of Orphans for the Internal Armed Conflict”, and later on, aided by the Center for Forensic Analysis and Applied Sciences in Guatemala, they started to process exhumations for their family members’ bodies. This allowed not only to bury their relatives according to their traditions but also allowed for emotional closure. The human rights movements and the search for transitional justice in Guatemala led to Francisco to recently testify along with other human rights defender groups, in the Genocide and Crimes-Against-Humanity Trial of General Efraín Ríos Montt, who led a military coup in Guatemala in 1982 that resulted in the persecution of Francisco’s community and many other Maya’s communities.

The militarization of the Ixil region during the conflict that continued through the Armed Civilian Patrols that started with the development poles and stayed after the war had served to lurk indigenous communities allowing the deployment of climate-destructive industries financed by international capital. In that regard, Gaspar mentioned that even if the military left the communities after the war “their strategies remain in the memory of the Armed Civilian Patrols who entered the houses, mistreated us, threatened my father that they were going to throw a grenade in the house, because to them my father was a guerrilla member”. According to Gaspar, the Ixil region has a large amount of minerals and water resources and therefore these communities “automatically became the target of transnational and multinational companies after the Peace Accords”.

From 2010, Gaspar and his community began to work not only to block roads to avoid the entrance of transnational companies but also to gain space in the legal field where they can directly fight the state through official channels. They early discovered that the local authorities had dismembered the municipal ejido in order to allow access to transnational companies. He explains how the post conflict communities created regulations to protect their collective land: “in one of the regulations is settled that people who want to sell their land or their piece of land to people outside the community will be expelled out the community. The land has to remain as a community asset”.

In July 2020, [ProPublica and The New York Times Magazine published an article by Abrahm Lustgarten](#) as the first in a series on global climate migration. They have been working on a model that focuses on changes in Central America using climate and economic-development data. The model estimates that migration will rise every year regardless of climate, but that the amount of migration increases substantially as the climate changes. The article shows two scenarios, one more moderated where drought and food insecurity caused by climate change will drive rural people in Mexico and Central America out of the countryside spurring a rapid and increasingly overwhelming urbanization. Then they will move north, pushing the largest number of migrants toward the United States. “The projected number of migrants arriving from Central America and Mexico rises to 1.5 million a year by 2050, from about 700,000 a year in 2025. The

second and the most extreme climate scenarios shows how more than 30 million migrants would head toward the US border over the course of the next 30 years.”

This article exposes how studies have shown that climate is rarely the main cause of migration, but it is almost always an exacerbating element that propels migration. Climate change has also been studied as a migration driver from rural to urban settings (Hunter et al 2013; Nawrotzki et al 2015), as a form of adaptation to climate change and as a contribution to resilience and innovation in this process of adaptation (McLeman and Smith 2006; McLeman and Hunter 2010; Scheffran et al 2012). I would say that climate change also generates a breakdown in the social fabric. It produces a disarticulation in the forms of community organization such as the one led by Francisco and Gaspar where climate change plays a role as an ally to dismember indigenous and peasant struggles.

The evidence on climate change also points out that the lack of rain and then flooding is devastating peasants and indigenous communities, which in the context I just showed makes it easier for transnational companies to push people away and dispossess them from their territories. Additionally, the militarization by the army and paramilitary forces of the Maya-Ixil region have served to protect the interest of the international capital that coordinated with local authorities works in total impunity causing political persecution of those who dare to get in the way of those interests and are lucky remain alive.

Francisco and other witnesses that testified in the Genocide and Crimes-Against-Humanity Trial of General Efraín Ríos Montt, have been threatened directly by people close to the Guatemalan military. One of his colleagues was already victimized. Francisco recalls the episode “they put the gun to his head and when they shot him, he managed to move, so the bullet passed him away closely. He survived but I do not want to be left out in a coma.” Gaspar was also threatened, but became afraid and decided to leave when he was confused by his brother who was almost beaten to death. Gaspar is aware that “with the economic power they have, the companies buy mercenaries (ex-military agents) and use them to harass and investigate our movements. And not only that, the most complicated thing about that is that those mercenaries, those former paramilitaries, organize groups of young people in the same community as us. They train them to follow us, to investigate us, to harass us mainly. That is the method they have used”.

Just a couple of days ago, [Benito María](#), a very close friend of Francisco and Gaspar and environmental activist, land, and human rights defender was murdered by armed men in his vehicle in the highlands.

I met Francisco and Gaspar until they were asylum seekers strained at the border of Mexico and the US. Their stories of political persecution at the hands of the Guatemalan military and other economic forces are the result of their environmental and human rights activism to defend their land, their territory, their traditions, and their communities from historic mechanisms of exclusion and dispossession. Furthermore, as migrants in transit through Mexico and asylum seekers at the border with the US, the imposition of cruel asylum policies in the US such as the MPP and

sponsored by the Mexican government, jeopardize and do not contribute to comprehensive protection required by a person fleeing their country of origin due to persecution and widespread violence.

Further research on the intersection on climate migration, dispossession and persecution is not only urgent but needs to be encouraged in order to advance towards more equitable and just sustainability policies, especially in countries where climate change is showing serious human consequences, and where defending human rights and advocating for an agenda on environmental justice can be lethal.

Notes:

For more information about Francisco and Gaspar as asylum seekers strained at the border, listen to [EPISODE THREE: TRUMP'S WAR ON ASYLUM](#) which is part of the series Entry Denied, a podcast co-hosted by Alex Aleinikoff and Deb Amos and produced by the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility at The New School.

[“Ixil and migrant leaders need support”](#) Gofundme campaign.

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