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Guatemala, Factor 15: Human Rights

Guatemala: The Silent Holocaust

Guatemala is a Central American country bordering Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. In Guatemala, 51% of the population lives in rural areas, with agriculture accounting for a fifth of Guatemala's Gross Domestic Product, and is responsible for employing 50% of the total labor force. Day laborers and handicraft production are responsible for most other jobs (Rural). Division of labor heavily relies on gender roles with men doing physically demanding work and women doing household or service work. Handicrafts are also responsible for wages of most women and children (Vidgen). Most of Guatemala's indigenous and rural communities are primarily involved in smallholder family farms (Rural). There are an estimated eight hundred and thirty thousand farms in the country, with smallholder farms accounting for 92% of all farms, but only 22% of the agriculturally used land; the average size for a smallholder farm is two and a half hectares of land (Welcome). Commercial agricultural products include coffee beans, cotton, rubber, fruit, sugar, cattle, and pineapple. Since the Mayan civilization began, Guatemala has been largely agricultural. Mayan people moved from environmentally harmful slash-and-burn farming methods which involve clearing and burning forests to create agricultural land, to terracing, drainage, and irrigation along with the introduction of fertilizer and elevated fields, improved soil fertility and water retention (Rural). One of the most important staple crops in Guatemala is corn, and extremely poor individuals eat a majority of corn, beans, and fruit because of its affordability at low-income levels. Small farms often include a cornfield called a *malipa*, because of its affordability, versatility and nutritional value. Middle class people commonly eat tortillas, black beans, fried or scrambled eggs, tomato, onion, ham, sausage, and plantains (Vidgen). Agriculturally, Guatemala is highly diverse.

Although Guatemala is highly agricultural, malnutrition is very prevalent throughout the country. Guatemala has the highest rate of malnutrition among children under five in Latin America at close to 50%, and indigenous people have a malnutrition rate of close to 70% because of the racially unequal distribution of wealth (Welcome). In September 2009, Guatemala declared a food emergency due to drought causing smallholder farmers to lose 80 to 100% of their crops. Farms in the dry corridor of Guatemala were especially impacted. Although there are high malnutrition rates, there is no shortage of food in markets, but because of the high poverty rates lower class individuals cannot afford food. Markets are the main purchasing locations for food in Guatemala, also providing clothing and livestock, and include surplus produce from smallholder farms. Large cities have supermarkets, but many rural people do not have adequate transportation to reach these markets. The expectation to produce large families limits the ability to sustain a family, causing lower nutritional levels (Vidgen). The unstable economy within Guatemala causes drastic poverty rates and a severe lack of basic nutrition.

Guatemala has many barriers to improving agricultural productivity. Primarily, droughts are detrimental to agricultural yields and can launch the country into economic trouble and food crises (Vidgen). Another barrier is El Niño, a tropical storm that causes weather to vary wildly causing floods, droughts, and hurricanes. Guatemala is also very agriculturally unsuitable because of mountainous terrain and forests, forcing farming to take place on steep slopes such as the Andes mountain range, and limiting reliable water sources forcing farmers to rely on rainfall to irrigate crops. Agrarian practices are also affected by the delegation of the most valuable farmland to biofuel crops and commercial companies, while lowest grade lands are devoted to agriculture. Guatemala also experiences earthquakes and volcanoes caused by three tectonic plates in the area (Vidgen). Along with tectonic activity, Guatemala's weather patterns are changing causing increasing droughts and hurricanes causing changed farming practices to become a necessity due to increasing climate instability (Rural). Furthermore, agricultural productivity is greatly stunted by large-scale mining and hydroelectric operations that have been increasingly imposed upon rural communities that lack sustainable infrastructure. This has resulted in human rights being imposed upon as farmland is confiscated from indigenous populations and they are forced into labor. International

corporations commonly ignore international standards on business and human rights as they take advantage of low poverty levels to acquire mass amounts of farmland (Vidgen). These factors prevent Guatemala from being suitably agriculturally productive.

Environmental degradation is another barrier within Guatemala. During the thirty-six year armed conflict, there was a “Scorched Earth Policy” in order to ensure the degradation of the environment past survival to aid the genocide of Mayan people. This policy included deforestation, crop burning, and livestock killings and has irreparably affected the environment in Guatemala. Slash and burn farming was used ancient Mayans, and was adopted by logging and lumber industries today. Due to large corporations using much of the agricultural land in Guatemala, there is little environmental conscientiousness, and regulations are often ignored. Deforestation is common as jungles are cleared for timber, cattle ranching, oil pipelines, airstrips, new settlements, and cornfields (Vidgen). Garbage and diesel gas clouds pollute the environment causing further damage. Tourism is one of the biggest influences on pollution, causing improper sewage and waste disposal, and inappropriate development in rainforests. Furthermore, oil exploitation has led to drilling in El Petén to use subterranean oil reserves, and an influx in mining and hydroelectric fields.

Mayan land is being degraded, leading to nutritional instability. Large-scale infrastructure projects in environmentally sensitive areas such as drilling in the Lago de Izabal, and the Northern Transversal project, will result in highways consolidating existing roads, but will pass through a national park. Transitional mining companies are moving in with little to no local consultation of rural communities, causing chemical runoff, deforestation, eviction of communities, and water pollution (Rural). Commonly, Mayan owned land is confiscated by the government to use in large government projects, or by commercial companies, utilizing police to forcibly evict residents, and end protests. On the Pacific side of the country where most of the population lives, land is mostly agricultural or industrial, while the remaining forests are in danger due to impoverished families’ need for wood for cooking and heating (Vidgen). High levels of exploitation of resources and land and water sources have led to a decrease in available nutrition and volatile food prices.

There are many barriers preventing Guatemalans from earning sufficient wages. After the change in Guatemala’s trade system under Rufino Barrios in 1871, manufacturing plants were introduced as well as cash crops, including coffee and bananas (Vaughn). The Mayan people forcibly gave up all remaining landholdings to the government for use creating coffee plantations and were forced into labor (Vidgen). After the election of Jorge Ubico, the United Fruit Company, a United States based corporation, became the dominant force. The government, commonly known as El Pulpo, or the octopus, began to possess more power over the country and owned over 40% of the land. Ubico oppressed opposition and continued Mayan exploitation and created an Anti-Vagrancy law requiring Mayan citizens to carry a passbook proving they had worked up to one hundred and fifty days a year, without pay, on large estates or public projects created by Ubico. Traveling without these passbooks results in jail or death, and reinforced the dominance of the *Ladinos*, or high class Europeanized Guatemalans, government, and corporations (Vaughn). Guatemala is highly mountainous, creating barriers excluding the rural and impoverished communities from reaching large urban areas (Rural). Poverty is especially concentrated within the 40% of the population considered as indigenous because of extreme racial inequality, with seven out of every ten indigenous Maya living in poverty. High rates of poverty are also seen in persons who lack assets and access to resources, people who own no land, wageworkers, micro-entrepreneurs, and traditional handicraft artisans (Welcome). Job stability is low, leading to high poverty rates throughout Guatemala.

Guatemala has had a long history of dictatorships and oppression, resulting in genocide of Mayan people. More than two hundred thousand victims died in 1982 and 1983 during the genocide resulting from Guatemala’s civil war; 83% of these victims were Mayan, some of whom were women, children, or elderly (Genocide). The Guatemalan government and army created a counter insurgency force, commonly regarded as “killing machines”, in attempt to suppress the Mayan people, claiming they were working towards communism. The genocide, commonly known as “the Silent Holocaust,” lasted two years (20th). The *Ladinos* considered the Maya to be illiterate, and lower class (Genocide). Army and “civil patrols”

exterminated six hundred and twenty six defenseless communities. Brutal murders were committed while some family members were forced to watch or participate. A Scorched Earth policy caused buildings to be destroyed, crops were destroyed, water supplies were tainted, livestock was killed, and religious and culturally significant areas or symbols were violated or destroyed (20th). Labor leaders, students, religious leaders, and civil society leaders were also persecuted. Psychological damage was common among any survivors. Children were commonly beaten, thrown alive into pits to be later covered in corpses, tortured, beaten against rocks or trees, and raped. Women often experienced rape, and to ensure babies would not survive, women's wombs were beaten until involuntary abortion, or the fetuses were removed from the mother's uterus and impaled, both being left to die. Thousands of rapes were committed during the genocide and 75% of Mayan women admitted to being raped (Genocide). Limb amputation, impalements, dismemberments, burning people alive, slowly burning their feet and backs and hanging them in front of the community, facial mutilation, removing sex organs, repeatedly being shot, and other tortures and being left to die were common practice as most victims were tortured before death (20th). Most victims were buried in mass graves, if buried at all. The biggest mass grave was in Chimaltenango, Comalapa, where the remains of two hundred and twenty victims were discovered. Military commandoes executed people and performed forced disappearances. Death squads, some with military connections, used psychological warfare and intimidation to suppress rebellion. These human rights violations have helped to perpetuate the class system and racism within Guatemala.

The government of Guatemala is directly responsible for the restriction of rights of women and indigenous peoples, ultimately causing genocide. The state and army were responsible for 93% of human rights violations, while the United States continually supported the Guatemalan government and provided arms and equipment. The United States also schooled guerillas and Guatemalan officers notorious for human rights violations in the School of the Americas in Georgia, USA. The CIA also worked with Guatemalan officers, some of whom were on CIA payroll even after the commission of known human rights violations; the United States justified this by claiming it was necessary in the wider context of the Cold War and anti-communist action (20th). The United States has had a Guatemalan government connection since the early 1950s when Colonel Jacobo Arbenz was elected President, and in conjunction with the United Fruit Company, the United States overthrew Arbenz due to claims of communist influence. Although Guatemala transitioned into democracy in the 1990s, inquires into the genocide has not resulted in prosecution of human rights violations (Genocide). The government in Guatemala has restricted the rights of women and the indigenous Mayans, causing genocide.

Women are particularly disadvantaged in Guatemala. There is a high sexual assault and violence rate, especially during Guatemala's genocide. There is also a reduction of rights based on gender discrimination. *Machismo* is a Spanish word referring to the male sense of dominance that is common in Latin America, resulting in extreme aggression to male homosexual relationships and high sexual aggression in heterosexual relationships. Homosexuality is very taboo and is generally not accepted (Rural). There are still homosexual individuals in Guatemala, but it is oftentimes repressed and secretive. Men are largely dominant and control all aspects of female life. Men alternately are considered superior and are often higher educated. Polygamy is common and men often have multiple partners. Men are considered protectors and are held in high respect. Women on the other hand, are idealized and oppressed causing a very over sexualized culture. Catcalling is also very common and can escalate to physical assaults, rape, and murder of women and girls. The violence directed towards foreigners is increasing as well. These attacks show discrimination to the point of hatred for women, and in many cases women being seen as disposable (Vaughn). In Guatemala, women are particularly in danger.

Mayan children are expected to contribute financially towards the family as soon as they reach an age in which they are capable, due to extreme poverty. Children as young as five or six years old begin to sell handicrafts to contribute to the family economically (Rural). Many Mayan children are adopted internationally because of the extreme rates of poverty and wedlock births, and it is not uncommon for children who cannot be properly cared for to run away or be cast away from their families to live on the street. There are between five and ten thousand of these predominantly Mayan "Street Children" living in Guatemala City or other urban centers. Drug use is common among these children and they use inhalants,

such as glue, because inhalants are commonly cheaper than food (Vaughn). Ladinos believe these children to be nuisances, but there are very few shelters or alternatives available to help these children. Ladino children on the other hand, are not expected to work until they are teenagers, however, the older children are expected to serve as caretakers when needed. The state of Guatemala has put children and their families in danger.

The education system in Guatemala is struggling due to little financial backup, high concentrations in urban areas, the overall poor quality of the educational system, and ethnic and sexual inequalities. Many indigenous Mayan parents do not believe in formal education and believe that schooling takes away their cultural identity because Mayan heritage and culture is not included in school curriculum (Vaughn). Protests by Mayan communities has resulted in the Academy of Mayan Languages, to teach the Mayan alphabet and integrate Mayan heritage into the education system (Rural). Although changes to the educational system have come into effect, attendance rates among the indigenous population is still very low, especially during the harvest period, resulting in high dropout rates, grade failures, and poor test scores (Vaughn). In agriculturally centered rural communities there are very few schools and many of the children are too devoted to farming to attend school (Rural). Attendance rates are still very low in Ladino populations at 40%, partially due to an overwhelming lack of enforcement (Vaughn). Primary school enrollment is 39 to 48% in urban areas, and 35% in rural areas (Rural). After secondary school, there are public and private schools, and most private schools are affordable for middle to upper class Ladino families; Mayan families on the other hand, commonly attend public or Catholic schools. Higher education is then provided by the state university *la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala* and several private universities (Vaughn). One of the biggest problems threatening education is illiteracy. The literacy rate over all is 70%, while the Maya have a literacy rate of about 30% with most of the literate population being men (Rural). Education in Guatemala is highly volatile due to the government and economic state.

The health care system is often ignored in Guatemala. Contaminated food and water is common and can lead to amoebas, parasites, and gastrointestinal infections and present a food risk, especially among street vendors and uncooked foods such as fruits and vegetables (Rural). Guatemalans lack education and awareness regarding many diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS because of the low occurrence of government campaigns to educate people (Rural). Furthermore, rabies is endemic in Guatemala and stray dogs present a risk to people and livestock, further causing agricultural strain (Rural). Overall the health system is limited and inadequate with underfunded and understaffed hospitals and clinics, especially in rural areas, which have the least developed health situations, with some communities receiving no regular health care or education at all and relying only on folk healing and traditional medicine (Rural). There is little to no attention to the state of the health care system in Guatemala.

Drug trafficking is high in Guatemala and rates are rising as the country has overtaken Panama as the new Central American trafficking center in recent years. Although illegal, coca leaves, used in the production of cocaine, as well as marijuana provide substantial economic benefit. Drug barons using Guatemala to get to the United States control the drug trade, and drugs have especially lead to higher drug related violence, especially along the Mexican border. Drugs are illegal in Guatemala, however drug trade and trafficking is common, but is dealt with by long jail sentences and heavy fines. Opium poppies are sold to Mexican traffickers for processing into heroin while marijuana is used mainly for domestic consumption. Cocaine is also very common in Guatemala and agricultural areas are commonly used to grow coca leaves, which are processed into cocaine (Vaughn). Drug related crime is putting Guatemala at significant risk.

The status of human rights within Guatemala includes an extreme social and gender inequality. Mayan racial persecution and sexual bias towards women is still largely present today in Guatemala, with the recorded rape numbers staying at high levels. Guatemala's drug trade has drastically increased, leading Guatemala to become more dangerous. There are high levels of crime including drug trafficking and domestic use, gangs, organized crime, illegally armed forces, and street crime. Civil rights activists working towards a safer Guatemala are often killed in the process. The government also denies that crimes against humanities have been committed and does not acknowledge the genocide to have

happened; no crimes against humanity violations have been prosecuted. Also, monopolies still continue to grow and nutrition levels continually decline. Indigenous groups are still largely persecuted and their rights still stay much below those of the Ladinos. In attempt to improve human rights in Guatemala, it is necessary for rural and urban citizens to fight for their rights as indigenous peoples and continue to press the government for prosecution of crimes; many do not because of the constant threat of death. This racial bias surrounding the Mayan population, and gender bias surrounding women, is currently preventing Maya and women to earn a working wage, get above the poverty level, and access sufficient health care and education. Furthermore, it is paramount that women press societal standards and readily seek education and employment. Smaller families and birth control would aid in the ability to provide adequate nutrition, as smaller families can be easier provided for. This would also cut down on the amount of homeless children and international adoptions. The government needs to help provide better funding towards education as well as health care, especially in rural communities as well as be less restrictive of Mayan people and women, allowing them to be seen as equals. Education and health care would help to further the lives of many Guatemalan citizens allowing them to obtain employment and prevent diseases. The war on drugs could be greatly improved, preventing violent street crime and decrease drug related death rates. Restrictions at Guatemalan borders as well as prosecution for controlled substances must increase in order to decrease drug usage and trafficking. Monopolies should be kept in control and should not be able to over use agricultural land. The Guatemalan economy is based on monopolies such as the United Fruit Company, monopolizing income of impoverished population and creating a declining country that heavily relies on imports. This would also increase agricultural land in possession of currently landless people. Guatemala would greatly benefit from becoming more agriculturally self-sufficient and relying less on importing resources. Environmental degradation should be monitored, as a better environment will aid in the production of nutrition. Proper land stewardship and sustainable breeding practices would increase the amount of food and income for Guatemalan families. Mayan livestock were killed and crops burned during the international armed conflict, leading to inability to access nutrition. Better farming practices such as crop rotation, crop variation, and water preservation could greatly preserve environment and agricultural sustainability. The burning of crops and the practice of livestock killing is also counterproductive to environmental sustainability and causes imbalance within the ecosystem and inefficient food production techniques. Most importantly, the commission of the crimes against humanities committed in Guatemala should be prosecuted. The United Nations Human Rights Council has suggested the abolition of the death penalty, increased women's rights, improved prison conditions, protection of human rights defenders, and the consultation of indigenous peoples in relation to development proposals in their territory. Lastly, the eradication of poverty and hunger, promotion of gender equality and empowering women, and the insurance of environmental sustainability would be the three Millennium Development Goals that would best help resolve the situation in Guatemala by 2015. Guatemala has reached success before under the Mayan people, and can again, but now these very people are being persecuted as this country is under crisis.

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