

Pause to Consider Our Amazing Accompaniers

While we consider how to meet the challenges we face in our new political order, let's take a minute to draw inspiration from one of our amazing young people, Michael Hoyt—a UUCA-sponsored accompanier in Guatemala. He recently finished his time in Guatemala and in his last letter he tells of the brutality against the indigenous peoples at the hands of the government and other acts of violence and intimidation. His tireless dedication and commitment to social justice is awe inspiring. Please read his letter below.

About Michael Hoyt: Michael is the 16th accompanier supported by UUCA through its accompanier program, part of Partners for Guatemala and Arlington (PAG). A graduate of Drake University, he is from rural Iowa and worked as an AmeriCorps Mentor with Iowa Legal Aid in Des Moines. His legal aid experience led to his selection as part of the Emergency Response Accompanier Team out of Guatemala City.

Hello again, and happy 2017! I have officially completed my time as a human rights accompanier in Guatemala and am now set to transition back to life in the U.S. I'm dedicating this final letter to my experience accompanying Angelica Choc and German Chub in the eastern department of Izabal. Over the past few months this case quickly became my central focus within the mobile team's cases.

I had discussed Angelica's case in my initial letters: following the murder of her husband in 2009 by private security of the Guatemalan Nickel Company's local mine in El Estor, Angelica is now the lead plaintiff in two lawsuits. The first, filed against the former mine owner Hudbay Resources, continues in the Canadian court system. Meanwhile, the homicide trial of ex-chief of private mine security Mynor Padilla is nearing its conclusion in Guatemala. We accompany Angelica at closed-door hearings for the latter case in Puerto Barrios, where we wait outside the courtroom.

Around midnight on September 16th Angelica and her two youngest children woke up to gunshots outside of her El Estor home. She immediately called family members to spend the rest of the night at the house, and in the morning they found four perforations in the outer wall. Angelica also called the police the following day to investigate the scene, who also found 12-gauge shotgun casings and 22-caliber bullet casings outside the home.

This is one of many aggressions and acts of intimidation against Angelica. Many in her position would have requested a police presence, but as a high profile figure often traveling between important hearings and meetings, the corruption within local police factors into her decision to avoid this security presence. General distrust in the Guatemalan police is



exaggerated in El Estor, where police are widely viewed as bought by the nickel company.

Angelica outside the local public prosecutor's office after formally denouncing the attack on her house

In a Latin American context where environmental justice leaders regularly confront violence and intimidation, particularly those of indigenous ethnicity, to view this incident as anything other than a message is difficult. Just last March, for instance, Angelica's hero and Honduran environmental activist Berta Cáceres was murdered for her resistance to a hydroelectric dam. We remain deeply concerned about the incident in El Estor and future attacks as the trial nears its end. The security of Angelica allows an indigenous woman's voice to be heard, a widow to realize justice for the murder of her husband, and a mother to sleep without fear for herself or children.

Just days later I accompanied Angelica as she formally reported the incident at the public prosecutor's office, attended court hearings in Puerto Barrios, and traveled back to El Estor. We also visited German Chub, the other El Estor resident we accompany. The night of Adolfo's murder in 2009, mine security gunfire also left German with life-threatening injuries which resulted in paralysis, and today he continues to live in El Estor using a wheel chair. German therefore finds himself in a vulnerable position with respect to attacks and intimidation, relying heavily on Angelica and international organizations to keep him informed.

Less than two weeks after the shots outside of Angelica's home, a commemoration in honor of the seventh anniversary of Adolfo Ich's murder was held on September 27th. Along with family and friends of Angelica, two other companions were present at the event in El Estor, and below are photos from the night. Shortly after the commemoration I had the opportunity to give Angelica a letter of international solidarity signed by 83 organizations and 650 individuals from around the world. She was moved to see such support from near and far.





Photo: James Rodriguez

Two-day hearings in Puerto Barrios occurred on a weekly basis throughout the fall, and in October Angelica traveled to Geneva, Switzerland to speak at the United Nations. We continued to attend hearings to maintain our presence at the Puerto Barrios courthouse during her absence, and meanwhile, more conflictivity around land access arose in El Estor. On October 26th, as two helicopters circled overhead, nearly 2000 armed police and military members executed the eviction of three communities in El Estor. In total, 88 indigenous families were evicted following a court ruling in favor of a local banana plantation. Evictions occurred despite a preexisting negotiating table between communities and plantation owners, and the police chief stressed the priority of dialogue and claimed agents acted without arms, despite documented injuries and photos depicting the contrary.



Photo: Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC)

These forced evictions are reminiscent of the events in the region which led to the murder of Adolfo Ich and paralysis of German Chub in 2009. Armed officials and private security carried out evictions for the expansion of the nearby nickel mine in communities around El Estor before the attacks on Adolfo and German, including in Lote Ocho, a case I mentioned in my first letter. In 2007 soldiers and mine security raped 11 women in Lote Ocho before dragging them out of their homes and burning their houses. The women of Lote Ocho are now also plaintiffs in a Canadian case against Hudbay. German recently explained to me a march on the El Estor Mayor's office by representatives from the most recently evicted communities, which he observed from afar. I was inspired to witness his passionate solidarity with the communities demanding their rights just as he did and for which he was attacked and paralyzed.

The continued militarization strategies to privilege capitalist interests over indigenous livelihood in El Estor also echoed the contemporaneous events in Standing Rock, North Dakota. Reading the updates on Standing Rock while I accompanied El Estor residents highlighted how Guatemalan struggles often parallel those back home. While the fight isn't over, a victory against the DAPL also displays the power of organized resistance and gives hope to Guatemalan activists. Many indigenous Guatemalans traveled or sent messages of solidarity to the water protectors of North Dakota.

In late October, as Angelica spoke before various entities of the United Nations, she denounced the intimidation against her by Hudbay and the mine, in addition to concerns about the impartiality and competence of the judicial process in Puerto Barrios. She expressed a complete lack of faith in the Guatemalan justice system. It's worth highlighting again the irregular nature of the entire trial, which began in April 2015 after Mynor Padilla had spent two years as a fugitive of justice. The trial has included extreme delays, an attempt by Angelica to recuse the judge for racial discrimination, and an order to preclude press and international observation supposedly for Angelica's security despite her constant objection.

On November 17, shortly after Angelica's return to Guatemala, public debate ended and dates for closing arguments were announced in the homicide trial of Mynor Padilla. In the same hearing the plaintiffs, CICIG, and public prosecutor made a motion to reopen the trial to the public during the sentence. The judge threw out the request and the trial will conclude behind closed doors.

Note: The CICIG is the UN's Commission against Corruption and Impunity in Guatemala and in this trial is arguing that the incompetence of the State and collusion of military hierarchy contributed to the murder of Adolfo Ich. Mynor Padilla is a former military colonel.

Throughout early December I accompanied closing arguments in Puerto Barrios. I could feel the extra energy in the courthouse with more national and international observers present and most importantly with the presence of German. After finally securing the funds, German was able to travel from El Estor and attend hearings in Puerto Barrios with two companions to assist him. The obstacles to justice for German extend to the very courtroom door—before each hearing German must be carried up the front steps of the courthouse and another flight of stairs to the second floor courtroom.

Unfortunately, after originally proposing three consecutive days of hearings during the week of December 5th, the judge elected to end hearings for the week after one and a half days and with just the defense's closing arguments remaining. There were no hearings the following week while one of the two defense lawyers vacationed in North America. Hudbay Minerals is believed to be paying his professional fees.



Suddenly six months accompanying Angelica and German and following their cases has come to an end. Dedicating so much time to an accompaniment of just two people granted me to the opportunity to grow very close with both, and the goodbyes were hard as I left with the trial lingering near its conclusion. With the verdict still unknown, threats against Angelica always looming, and forced evictions continuing in the region, what we know for certain is that the fight continues. I will send out a quick email once the sentence is delivered.

We interviewed Angelica on being a female Guatemalan activist on my last night in Puerto Barrios. I am thankful for the final inspiring moment with her as I sat and listened to her relentless fire and dedication. Here is a translated excerpt:

I realize that perhaps not all of us have this voice allowing us to search for justice for violations of our rights as women (and as indigenous women more than anything, because we are the majority of the affected communities in areas where businesses, large landowners, hydroelectric dams, and

monoculture farms have stripped our land that we defend—especially us women). And I realize that this has taken a great toll on us . . . I think a lot about so many children's futures, and I see how we are destroying Mother Earth. It is a great sadness. So, if I am searching for justice now, and if we manage to achieve justice, it would be a victory not just for my country, not just for my indigenous brothers and sisters, but also for so many countries suffering at the hands of businesses and especially the many women who have suffered like me.

I am so very fortunate to have had this experience: I have gotten to know inspiring figures like Angelica and German, learned even more about the role of my country in Guatemala, and am returning ready to get to work. Thank you for reading and for supporting NISGUA's Guatemalan Accompaniment Project and more especially the Guatemalans we accompany. Amplifying their voices and stories in the U.S. and spurring action are crucial elements to effective international accompaniment.

Please keep following current events in Guatemala and how we as North Americans and our government contribute to the realities in the global South. I also encourage you to join NISGUA's mailing list by visiting nisgua.org and adding your email address to the listserv.

I have frequently heard Aura Elena Farfán of FAMDEGUA (one of the plaintiff organizations in the CREOMPAZ Case from my previous letter) describe the persistence of FAMDEGUA as the "pebble in the shoe" of the State, right wing actors, etc. May we all be that pebble wherever we are—never letting the oppressor feel comfortable or immune, never normalizing hate. May we recommit ourselves to standing on the side of justice, connecting struggles, and rebuilding a more equitable society.

Thank you again.

In solidarity,
Michael

