

Human Rights Monitoring Network in Guatemala

Concept

To assist the democratic development in Guatemala by promoting and entrenching human rights through the creation of a monitoring network linking human rights groups, the country's first human rights centre, NGOs and government institutions. This network would also be linked to international bodies both to receive and disseminate information.

A second, but not secondary, element would be to assist local NGOs in developing public relations campaigns, particularly on radio, to further promote democratic development and a respect for human rights.

Human Rights Environment

Guatemala is undergoing a fundamental change; after more than three decades there is now the hope of lasting peace. The army is to be cut by a third. The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) is to hand in its weapons. But the peace process is fragile and there is still a real concern about continued human rights violations. The view was often expressed to us in the course of our research that violence will continue to be endemic unless Guatemala moves swiftly toward becoming a truly democratic society and receives international assistance to help with this transition.

With former soldiers and former members of the URNG being reintegrated into civil society, human rights organisations within and outside Guatemala are looking to neighbouring El Salvador as an object lesson. It is not a promising example. There is ostensibly peace in El Salvador but the violence continues because while people do not have jobs, many still have guns. What's more, in Guatemala the civil war has gone on for so long there is a fear that it has become almost institutionalized.

According to Suzanne Rumsey, of the Inter Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICHRLA), the lead Canadian NGO in Guatemala, "People doing human rights work still have good reason to be cautious about what they are doing. As the military is downsized and the rebels disarmed there are going to be a lot of people with no job skills, except how to use a gun. There is a concern that there will be a spiral of civil violence, from organised gangs and from individuals."

Human rights groups are also concerned about the future in light of the Amnesty Law, passed in December. Under it, both military personnel and URNG members will receive amnesty for common crimes -- such as sedition, damage, threats and fires -- committed