

HUMANITARIAN REPORT 2024 GUATEMALA





The ICRC provides support to associations of families of people who went missing during the armed conflict. Milagro, for example, is searching for her father Margarito Lotz, who disappeared in Chimaltenango on 31 December 1981.

Luis Echeverría/ICRC

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INTRODUCTION

MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: THE URGENT NEED FOR A COORDINATED RESPONSE TO SILENT VIOLENCE



By Olivier Dubois, Head of Delegation for Mexico and Central America of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

A young man disappears on the migration route almost without a trace. A teenage girl survives a sexual assault and is too afraid to seek help. A family suddenly decides to leave their home to flee from violence. The common denominator: silence.

It is this silent violence that worries us the most, because whole families and communities are no longer able to live in peace and follow their dreams, but this violence may go unnoticed. Only those who sit at a comfortable distance can act like nothing is happening and convince themselves that this silence is peaceful rather than fearful.

In Mexico and Central America, where thousands of people suffer every day from the visible and invisible consequences of constant violence, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) strives to listen to and support victims of this violence and work with them to best respond to their needs and ultimately protect them. Our mission is unwavering: to do everything in our power to alleviate and prevent human suffering.

We know that to be effective in supporting people affected by violence, the humanitarian response must be coordinated. **It is the obligation of governments, the international community and society as a whole to try to understand what these people go through, to recognize and make their needs**

visible, and to make every effort to alleviate their suffering. Regardless of their origin, gender, sexual orientation or migration status, all those affected by the human consequences of violence must be protected and treated with respect.

Diplomacy and international cooperation are key to putting effective measures in place to protect these people. The human cost of violence must not go unnoticed, and the stories of thousands of people must not be forgotten. The region must raise awareness of this violence, rather than becoming indifferent to or accustomed to violence and its consequences. Treating victims with respect is one way of helping to find solutions to the humanitarian problems affecting the region; problems such as migration, disappearances, forced displacement and deprivation of liberty.

As a neutral party, we get involved by promoting and supporting humanitarian actions that allow us to address key issues of protection and we encourage regional cooperation to respond to them. We work with the region's governments to develop or strengthen protection mechanisms, build and implement regulatory frameworks in accordance with international law and standards, and promote international humanitarian law and international human rights law. **In a turbulent, increasingly fragmented world, it is crucial that we protect these actions, because in doing so we are protecting humanity itself.**

We get involved in initiatives that bring hope. In 2023, alongside the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Search Commission and Mexican, Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Panamanian authorities, we held a regional forum to explore how information could be legally exchanged to support the work of searching for, locating and identifying missing migrants.

The systematic exchange of standardized information is a step forwards in the search for missing people, and gives us a better chance of locating and identifying them if they have passed away. We are convinced that this significant regional effort is a big step in supporting the thousands of families who are searching for their loved ones.

These actions are key to continued protection of the rights of missing and deceased people and their relatives.

The suffering of all those affected by violence should not be ignored. We cannot afford to be indifferent to the pain and uncertainty faced by those who are deprived of their loved ones, their homes, their safety and their peace of mind.

EDITORIAL

RECOGNIZING AND ENSURING THE RIGHTS OF MISSING PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES: PUTTING RIGHT A WRONG FROM THE PAST



By: Karim Khallaayoun, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) head of mission in Guatemala

When someone disappears, the life of their family and community is turned upside down, never to be the same again. For families desperately seeking news about their loved ones, the disappearance fills them with a deep sense of anguish. Dreams for the future are put on hold and life wavers between the need to carry on searching and the need to move on.

In Guatemala, an unknown number of people – but they are likely to be in their thousands – face the painful reality of not knowing what happened to their loved ones, sometimes for decades. Irrespective of how much time has passed, families cling on to the hope that they will see their loved ones again. For the well-being of these families and society at large, providing answers is a humanitarian imperative and helps put right a wrong from the past.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) began its humanitarian operations in Guatemala at the end of the 1980s and, since then, we have seen first-hand the indescribable pain suffered by those who are looking for a missing loved one. We understand the lived reality of those who lost a relative during the internal armed conflict that lasted for more than three decades, from 1960 to 1996, of those who migrated without knowing what happened to their loved one, of those who reported a relative missing as a result of armed violence or in other circumstances.

Since 2010, Guillermina has been looking for her daughter-in-law, who disappeared on route to Mexico. The uncertainty she feels is compounded by that felt by the children left in her care.

“She left me with two children: a three-year-old girl and a five-year-old boy. It’s because of them that I continue with this battle. They say they want to know where their mother is (...) The truth is that years and years are going by, and some people think that the pain has gone, but no, the pain doesn’t go – it’s always there.”

Official information, despite being fragmented, presents us with a truth beyond doubt: disappearance affects both the past and the present. It is estimated that around 40,000 people disappeared during the internal armed conflict. The National Civil Police officially registered 38,000 cases of disappearances between 2009 and 2022, and it is not known how many of those people have been found. According to data from the Public Ministry, in 2023, there were on average five Isabel-Claudina alerts a day for missing women and 17 Alba-Keneth alerts a day for missing children and adolescents.¹

These figures give an idea of the valuable efforts undertaken by the Guatemalan state to respond to cases of vulnerable people who have gone missing, including establishing specialist alert mechanisms to find women, children and adolescents. However, the fact that information is fragmented and held by different organizations – including the Public Ministry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of the Interior, as well as the National Civil Police – presents a significant challenge when trying to understand the scale of the issue and its dynamics and provide an effective response to families, who, irrespective of the circumstances of the disappearance, all have the same need: to find out what happened to their loved ones and find them.

What is needed to address the issue is a national register that consolidates data about the missing and deceased (including information about unidentified remains), regardless of whether they are recent or historical cases.

Our experience in supporting the relatives of the missing, not only in Guatemala but around the world, has allowed us to reaffirm the need for a specialist legal framework developed together with families that adheres to international standards. Such a framework would recognize and protect the rights of the missing and their relatives, and provide the foundation of an institutional framework that enables states to fulfil their obligations to clarify the whereabouts of all missing people and therefore satisfy the right to know of their relatives, while also taking into account their economic, physical and mental health needs and their need for psychosocial support.

This legal framework would include a centralized search mechanism to facilitate coordination across different institutions in order to search, locate, identify and return the missing and/or deceased. It would provide a clear route for people searching for a loved one, as well as a mechanism for following up on cases, including for those who disappeared during the internal armed conflict.

Families are adrift on a fathomless sea of uncertainty and need a comprehensive regulatory framework to recognize, prevent and address disappearances and repair the damage.

1. In Guatemala, Isabel-Claudina alerts (for missing women) and Alba-Keneth alerts (for missing children and adolescents) are mechanisms for initiating an immediate search and safeguarding operation.



In Guatemala, we support the process of exhuming, identifying and returning the deceased to their families so that they can carry out a dignified burial in accordance with their beliefs. This provides solace to families and helps the healing process.

The ICRC has an exclusively humanitarian mission to alleviate the suffering of people affected by armed conflict and violence and we have been working in Guatemala to offer a multifaceted response to help the relatives of the missing cope with their confusing loss and to develop tools to help in their search. In recent years, we have also worked closely with civil society organizations in various parts of the country, supporting their initiatives to help those who are still without news of a loved one; and we continue our work to highlight the humanitarian consequences of a disappearance. We reaffirm our commitment to support families, organizations and authorities, as we are convinced that by combining our efforts and taking a long-term approach, we can achieve results.

Disappearance is a tragedy that is often consigned to obscurity, but not for the families. They do not forget, do not stop dreaming and do not stop searching, even after time.

Each and every family continues walking the streets looking for answers, asking if there have been any sightings and knocking on doors with the hope of seeing the face they long to see on the other side, awaiting news. The families remind us of the wrongs that have not been righted but that could start to be addressed through specific measures, such as publicly recognizing disappearances and a law to prevent it from happening and to address it.



Brenda Oliva/CRIC

We support the search for the remains of those who have died, assisting with the recovery and identification of bodies. This process allows family members to say goodbye to their loved ones and helps heal the pain caused by Guatemala's armed conflict.

THE MISSING OR DECEASED AND THEIR RELATIVES

In Guatemala, around 40,000 people disappeared during the internal armed conflict of 1960 to 1996. Hundreds more have disappeared in recent years while migrating or as a result of internal violence or in other circumstances.

Thousands of people have to live with the painful reality of a loved one going missing, and the quest for answers might last for decades. It doesn't matter how much time has passed or the circumstances of the disappearance, everyone has a right to know what happened to their missing relative and, in accordance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL), states have an obligation to provide answers about the fate of all missing people.

In Guatemala, there is no normative framework that recognizes and protects the rights of missing people and their relatives. Fragmented information – about the missing and deceased alike – and

a lack of effective mechanisms complicate the search process for families, who have to deal with a range of consequences related to the disappearance: it affects them mentally and physically, and has a financial and administrative impact on them, to name but a few.

The advanced age of the relatives, their deteriorating health and even their deaths serve as a sad reminder that there is a humanitarian imperative and an urgent need to provide them with an answer. There is a clearly a need to redouble efforts to find those who may still be alive, and to locate, exhume, identify and return the remains of those who have died. Added to this distressing picture is the situation faced by the relatives of migrants who may have gone missing or died. They suffer on an individual and family level and also face the anguish of having no news of their loved ones.

Since the outset of the ICRC's work in Guatemala, we have supported the search for people who went missing during the armed conflict in different departments across the country, which is mostly led by civil society organizations. The focus has been on searching for children who became separated in order to reunite them with their families. We have also supported the process of exhuming, identifying and returning the remains of those who have died, so that their families can bury them with dignity and in accordance with their beliefs and customs.

We have provided support to family associations on organizational processes to help them in their search for people who disappeared during the armed conflict and while migrating.

In 2023, we worked with family associations to identify their needs and provide them with psychosocial support tools. We also strengthened specialist capacities in mental health care and raised awareness among public service providers and other actors about using different approaches to meet the needs expressed by the families they are supporting.

In addition, we worked with the Guatemalan Red Cross to help family members stay in contact with each other. The National Society provides services to migrants who are in transit, helping them stay in touch with their loved ones back home through phone calls and by ensuring migrants can charge their phones and connect to the internet.

ACTIONS TO PROMOTE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS MORE RESPECTFUL OF LIFE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

As part of our humanitarian operations around the world, we engage in dialogue with armed and security forces, with the aim of promoting knowledge of and compliance with IHL and internationally recognized standards on the use of force.

In 2023, the ICRC resumed its dialogue with various sections of Guatemala's Ministry of National Defence and the National Civil Police, including units working in human rights and education, and units from the humanitarian rescue brigade, the regional training centre for peacekeeping operations (CREOMPAZ) and the specialized criminal investigation division, among others.



We increased the training on compliance with international standards that we provide to the armed and security forces, including the Guatemalan Ministry of Defence.

In addition, the armed and security forces received training to help strengthen their compliance with the international standards that apply to their work. Staff members from the Ministry of National Defence and the National Civil Police received training and awareness-raising activities, including a workshop for police leaders delivered by an ICRC-trained instructor from outside Guatemala and sessions on IHL and IHRL, which were delivered by the CREOMPAZ. The ICRC provided support during the practical exercises on applying IHL, which were organized by the Ministry of National Defence.

At regional level, Guatemala hosted two events, which were attended by military personnel from the other countries covered by the ICRC's regional delegation. These included a workshop on the military in security operations, which was attended by senior officers from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and the Dominican Republic; and a trainer-of-trainers course on the use of force and humanitarian principles, attended by police officers from Mexico and Costa Rica, as well as the other aforementioned countries.

The ICRC also promoted training and awareness-raising activities on IHL and IHRL for judges and other members of the judiciary, staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior, and members of the Guatemalan academy.

With a role as an observer and technical adviser, the ICRC played an active part in the Guatemalan Committee for the Implementation of IHL (COGUADIH), which was reactivated after a period of inactivity. Regular meetings were held and support was provided for the regional meeting of national IHL committees and similar bodies in America.

COOPERATION WITH THE GUATEMALAN RED CROSS

The ICRC and the Guatemalan Red Cross work closely together as part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Together, we can strengthen our humanitarian action and provide assistance to the people who need it most.

Promoting respect for the work of Guatemalan Red Cross was a priority in 2023 so that its volunteers could carry out their humanitarian work safely during the election period. We supported the strategy to strengthen its organizational capacities and we organized the sharing of experiences and lessons learned among National Societies on Safer Access during elections.

The Costa Rica Red Cross, the Honduran Red Cross, the Salvadorean Red Cross Society and the Mexican Red Cross all took part, which was of great benefit to the host National Society's staff and volunteers, as well as the people and communities they serve.

With the Guatemalan Red Cross, we jointly implemented the "Caring for those who care for us" programme, which aims to promote mental health and psychosocial well-being for the staff and volunteers who provide life-saving assistance and family links services, pre-hospital care and assistance to migrants, among others. We held group activities in nine Guatemalan Red Cross delegations to improve self-care and provide basic psychosocial support skills to foster peer support and improve the quality of the services they provide to people in need.

As part of our activities to help families stay in touch during migration and emergency situations, we worked with the Guatemalan Red Cross to strengthen its unit that works to re-establish contact between family members who become separated by armed conflict, natural disaster, migration or for other reasons.

Similarly, we provided connectivity services to facilitate contact between family members – including telephone calls, internet connection for instant messaging and phone charging points – in order to prevent family separation along migration routes. This was done in coordination with the Guatemalan Red Cross, houses belonging to the Social Welfare Department (shelters for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in Guatemala and Quetzaltenango) and the Refugio de la Niñez (protection shelter for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in Guatemala).



PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY

All of Guatemala's juvenile detention centres are located in the country's capital, which makes it difficult for family members who live far away to maintain contact and visit their loved ones, particularly when they can't afford the travel costs. For someone deprived of their liberty, contact with their family is a right and a fundamental part of their well-being, and also key to maintaining family unity and to successfully reintegrate into society.

In 2023, in order to maintain contact between young people in detention centres and their family members, the ICRC, in coordination with the Social Welfare Department, provided financial support by means of a grant to cover the travel costs of families with limited financial resources.

We also provided Social Welfare Department staff with training to develop their first-aid and basic emergency care skills, with the aim of improving access to and the quality of emergency care for people deprived of their liberty..

REFOCUSING OUR WORK IN GUATEMALA

During 2023, as part of a wider global strategy, our regional delegation for Mexico, Central America and Panama implemented measures to optimize the effectiveness of our humanitarian work and focus our resources on the most pressing needs of people affected by armed violence in the countries where we work.

Striving to provide protection and assistance is one of our primary objectives in fulfilling our mission to protect the lives and dignity of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.

As a result, we are making changes to our humanitarian programmes in Guatemala. We remain committed to working in Guatemala to help missing people and their families, strengthen dialogue with security forces and cooperate with the Guatemalan Red Cross to provide a neutral, impartial and independent response to people in need of humanitarian assistance.

Before our water and habitat programme ended in 2023, we made infrastructure improvements to the Guatemalan Red Cross delegations in Chiquimula, Peten and Puerto Barrios. The aim was to improve the delegations' capacities to provide primary-health-care services, reconnect separated family members and store supplies for migrants and internally displaced people (such as shelter, hygiene and food).

In 2024, we will end our mental health care and psychosocial support programmes. Since 2020, these programmes have strengthened capacities to provide care and respond to the needs of the families of missing people and people affected by violence, as well as those of humanitarian workers working on the front line, such as Guatemalan Red Cross staff and volunteers.

We have worked with key actors in local communities and state institutions – using dialogue, coordination mechanisms and technical capacity-building and tools – to respond to the mental health and psychosocial support needs of relatives of people who disappeared during the internal armed conflict and in the context of migration. We have also worked with the Guatemalan Red Cross to help its staff and volunteers in taking care of their own mental health and psychosocial well-being. They

face difficult situations when providing humanitarian assistance to others and we have provided them with resources to help them cope. The “Caring for those who care” programme was implemented in nine Guatemalan Red Cross delegations.

We will continue to support the work of the Guatemalan Red Cross in its work to help migrants, specifically the system of “humanitarian chains”, which is the coordination mechanism between National Societies to safely transport people who have suffered an accident while migrating back to their country of origin.



When someone disappears it affects all aspects of family life, including people’s mental health. In Sololá, we train groups of families to provide psychosocial support to other people in similar situations.



Regardless of the time that passes, deceased individuals have the right to be treated and buried in a dignified manner, and their relatives have the right to bid them farewell according to their traditions.

OUR WORK IN NUMBERS

MIGRANTS

**11.026****self-care messages**

were provided to migrants to reduce their risks while migrating.

**2 migrant shelters**

(in Tecún Umán and zone 1) received training in data protection.

**15.769 migrants** received health care.**35 injured migrants**

received emergency health care.

**15 migrant amputees**

received support to access physical rehabilitation and prosthetic services.

THE MISSING OR DECEASED AND THEIR RELATIVES



15.089 phone calls, 13.115 internet connections and 8.581 phone-charging or access-to-digital-device services

at 11 points on the migration route enabled migrants to contact their loved ones, helping to prevent family separation.

144

people received psychosocial support

in the search for their missing loved ones, through 295 sessions for relatives and 16 group sessions.



24 people who went missing during the internal armed conflict were found, identified and their remains returned to their families by civil society organizations supported by the ICRC.



50 relatives of missing people received psychosocial support from family associations supported by the ICRC.

THE MISSING OR DECEASED AND THEIR RELATIVES



11 family association representatives from the communities of Chimaltenango and Huehuetenango involved in the search for missing people strengthened their psychosocial support capacities through three training sessions.



18 mental health professionals from the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance received specialist training to improve the provision of care for the relatives of people who went missing during the internal armed conflict.



15 Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff members

received training in providing basic psychosocial support for the relatives of people who go missing during migration.



36 members of the National Institute of Forensic Science,

including 20 experts from the genetics laboratory, were trained in the use of the ante-mortem and post-mortem database.

COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE



18 mental health professionals from the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance received training to develop their specialist skills and methodologies when dealing with the victims of sexual violence and armed violence.



69 Guatemalan Red Cross staff and volunteers from the Ministry of Health took part in the basic emergency course.

25 people

completed the training-of-trainers basic emergency course to be able to share their knowledge.



PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY



62 families
received financial support from the ICRC to visit adolescents held in five detention centres.

ACTIONS TO PROMOTE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS MORE RESPECTFUL OF LIFE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

192 members of the armed forces were trained in the rules on the use of force in law enforcement operations.

184 members of the armed forces were trained in IHRL and 266 were trained in IHL and IHRL.



60 officials from the judicial branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and members of the academy were trained in IHL and IHRL.

COOPERATION WITH THE GUATEMALAN RED CROSS

18 Guatemalan Red Cross staff and volunteers received specialist training in providing psychosocial and mental health support to peers.



182 members of nine Guatemalan Red Cross delegations took part in 53 group sessions as part of the mental health and psychosocial support programme, which focused on meeting their own needs and strengthening psychosocial support for people in communities.

20 volunteers from nine Guatemalan Red Cross delegations took part in Restoring Family Links training sessions.



30 Guatemalan Red Cross volunteers took part in the Safer Access course and shared lessons learned about security during elections.



“It is so satisfying for us to be able to contribute to this work. We have worked with the ICRC psychologist and received training to improve our understanding of mental health. Not only has it been a boost to us in our work, but it has also helped us personally, because we have been able to provide feedback on the topics we covered in the diploma course on community mental health, and it improves our work with victims and survivors in communities.

This support is important because the relatives of the people who disappeared were left with so much pain; some never talked about it and now they are ill because of it.

Our presence, willingness to listen and visits allow people to unburden themselves, share their experiences and find relief. Although it is difficult for families to talk at first, we build trust with them over time and then they can open up to us. ”

Eva Francisco Tomás is a member of the Q'anil Maya Kaqchikel association for the victims of Chimaltenango (ASOQANIL).



“The places where we exhume bodies are not nice, that’s why I keep looking for my father, so that he can be buried in a cemetery. Then I can visit him on Father’s Day and on his birthday. One day I will find him and be able to visit the cemetery to leave him a bouquet of flowers.”







Milagro Lotzoj has been looking for her father Margarito Lotzoj since 31 December 1981 and is a member of the Q’anil Maya Kaqchikel association for the victims of Chimaltenango (ASOQANIL).

MISSION

We help people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything we can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. We also seek to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

People know they can count on us to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. Our experience and expertise enable us to respond quickly and effectively, without taking sides.

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