

## Deterring attacks against land rights defenders in Guatemala



Anuja Pathak sits back under the reddish shade of a parasol, sipping her coffee. It is a sunny Friday morning and summer is just around the corner when we meet at Boréal Coffee Shop in Geneva. Pathak has a carefree vibe that contrasts with her professional path.

The 27-year-old has just returned from spending one year in Guatemala as an international observer for Peace Brigades International (PBI). The NGO provides protection to threatened human rights defenders in different Latin American countries and other regions by stationing volunteers whose presence is meant to discourage attacks.

Along with other young volunteers, Pathak was sent to Guatemala to accompany indigenous and peasant rights groups persecuted for resisting mining, hydroelectric

and farming projects in their lands. The Central American region, and particularly Guatemala carry a history of violent repression against land rights defenders. In 2020, the country ranked seventh worldwide in killings of environmental activists, according to the NGO [Global Witness](#).

### **Waiting for an emergency**

Pathak and her colleagues were based in Guatemala City, the national capital, and would oversee several organisations. Most of them were a six or eight hours ride away in the rural regions of Verapaces. The volunteers would make weekly visits and were on call 24/7 in case they were contacted by one of the NGOs.

“I’m a light sleeper,” Pathak says, in between laughs. Taking a more serious tone, she tells of the emergencies that they’re expected to handle citing the example of the Association of Neighbours of Chicoyogüito, Alta Verapaz (AVECHAV) – an organisation that she grew fond of.

Massacred and kicked out of their lands by the army in the 1980s, the group is still fighting to recover their territory. One night, the volunteers got a call, Pathak remembers.

“Members of AVECHAV had tried to take over one piece of land, and they had been arrested and taken into custody for trespassing, including children,” she explains.

“It’s a complex situation because we don’t support the fact that they trespassed, but we have to make sure that their rights are respected.”

The volunteers then call the police to obtain information and activate their network of organisations and embassies in order to raise the alarm, all in the hopes that international attention will deter authorities from abusing those in custody.

In the remote rural areas where these rights groups are based, impunity is rampant and criminalisation of human rights defenders has been institutionalised. One of the other organisations PBI supports, the Peasant Committee of Altiplano (PCA), has over 300 members with arrest warrants on them and seven in prison, according to their own figures. The Q’eqchi’ indigenous group has been in a land dispute with the government and business landowners for over 100 years.

Imelda Teyul, leader of PCA, gave a chilling account last month in Geneva about the harassment and abuse she and other members went through when they visited their imprisoned colleagues.

Pathak’s job was to accompany some of the defendants during their trials. “A lot of times you go to court, and you just wait for hours. I think I went to more court hearings that were postponed than those that went through. It’s part of the process of criminalisation in order to cause frustration,” she says, sharing the feeling.

## **Clampdown on civil society**

In recent years, Guatemala has passed increasingly restrictive laws against civil society. The latest, the law of NGOs, gives the government the power to shut down any organisation that uses external funds to “alter public order”.

“It's obviously a law that seeks to restrain the work of organisations,” Pathak stresses. It has also made it harder for organisations like PBI. Set up in the 1980s and inspired by Gandhi's non-violence movement, PBI follows a non-partisan approach and abstains from making public statements.

“We would take measures in order to mitigate these risks, for example, by being very careful to always present clearly the work of PBI to avoid confusions.”

## **Questioning international aid**

Brought up in Birmingham by Swiss and Indian parents, Pathak was drawn to the world of international aid. Before going to Guatemala, she worked in Tunisia, Lebanon and Palestine with refugee and minority rights organisations. She had also volunteered in refugee camps in Calais and Greece.

“In the jungle refugee camp, there was a massive feeling of community, and people supported each other, whereas other camps organised by the UN or other international organisations have a different feeling,” she says.

Through her different experiences, Pathak found herself interested in grassroots organisations, the topic of her bachelor's degree thesis from the University of Leeds, and questioning the role of big international organisations in conflict-affected zones.

“The field of international development is crazy in the sense that we have countries supporting other countries, while also causing issues in those countries. It is ultimately based on racism and unequal wealth distribution. I was curious to understand how international organisations could change those power dynamics, rather than exacerbate them,” she reflects.

In Guatemala, Pathak got to experience a more horizontal approach, where the international organisation is only there to support local actors. “What will I take from this experience is the importance of a collaborative approach with different organisations and embassies and how that's the only way to make changes,” she says.

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