

Guatemala: journalism under pressure

By Marielos Monzón,
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I would like to start by thanking you all for your presence at this ceremony and to Amnesty International for the honour of this recognition [1]. I would like to share this honour with all Guatemalan journalists who work under very difficult conditions in my country and who constantly defend their right to freedom of expression and the right of the Guatemalan people to information and to denounce violations of their rights. I would also like to honour all the human-rights defenders whose work has been persecuted, discredited [2] and in some cases, criminalised.

The work of the Guatemalan journalist Marielos Monzón has been recognised by the International Women's Media Foundation [3] and Amnesty International [4].

One cannot understand my story without understanding the general context [5] in which Guatemalans live, both in the past and today. My work is intimately related to the story of thousands of fellow Guatemalans who themselves suffered the horrors of the war and who seek reconciliation through truth and justice [6]. The reconstruction of historical memory of the people is the only way of guaranteeing that the past does not repeat itself.

250,000 deaths, 50,000 disappeared and more than a million internally displaced was the result of the conflict which lasted for decades, and which bled the country, ripped apart the social fabric and still today takes its victims.

Despite the fact that the peace accords were signed in 1996, the terror structures remain intact, the civilian governments have been incapable of dismantling the clandestine and illegal groups which commit assassinations, kidnappings and forced disappearances with impunity and which have converted Guatemala into a territory for organised crime and drug trafficking.

I would also add to this the continuing injustice and inequality in the distribution of income, land and wealth, which has given Guatemala the second highest indices of inequality in Latin America – a situation which is sure to worsen with the implementation of the Central America Free Trade Agreement [7].

The peace continues to take its victims of a conflict still unresolved in its most profound structures. I am referring to the boys and girls who die every five minutes from chronic malnutrition or another related illness; to the 1,800 women killed in the last four years, or to the 284 attacks against organisations and human-rights defenders, including against us journalists [8].

Although one cannot hold the government responsible for all the attacks and killings, as one could in the past, it remains clear that these groups act with the tacit knowledge of the state, which does not want to or cannot dismantle them, confront them and bring them to justice. Injustice continues to be the best ally of this dark power, which has tentacles in all three state

powers and which is linked to drug trafficking, corruption, organised crime and the attacks against women, young people, human-rights activists and journalists.

I'm telling you all this, because only this way can I explain my conviction to continue working in journalism [9] – as a vehicle for the voice of those who they have wanted to silence, as a space to denounce the issues and actors who wish to remain invisible, as an opportunity for the victims to tell their stories, as a tool of investigation that permits us to know what happened and who ordered it.

I receive this recognition with the conviction that my work would not be possible without the help of my journalist colleagues, who everyday accompany me in this work; without the spaces that *Radio Universidad* and *Prensa Libre* have given me to publish my investigations, my analysis, my stories; without the understanding and the love of my young children, who in spite of the threats [10], and the unplanned, immediate exiles that saved their lives and the fear during some very difficult days, continue to have confidence and belief in what I do; and without the memory of my father, Guillermo Monzón, a human-rights lawyer assassinated in 1981 by death squads, who taught me that all of us have the responsibility of making another Guatemala possible.

I wish to finish by acknowledging the support that human-rights organisations like Amnesty International [11] give in Guatemala in these difficult situations, and the vigilance that governments and international press maintain on my country. I ask you to continue through every avenue possible to focus attention on what is happening [12] in this small Central American country, which appears to not want to wake up from its nightmare. Your solidarity and the space that the press and journalists in Britain and other countries offer to highlight what's happening in Guatemala are critical to confronting the situation.

It's like the Guatemalan author Augusto Monterrosa [13] wrote in one of his most famous works, one single phrase that encapsulates everything I'm trying to say:

“When I woke up the dinosaur was still there”.

Help us get rid of it.

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[1] <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news/press/16438.shtml> target=_blank

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[3] <http://www.iwfmf.org/features/8635> target=_blank

[4] <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/action/events/marielos.shtml> target=_blank

[5] <http://www.jpsviewfinder.com/travel/country/guatemala/truth.htm> target=_blank

[6] <http://www.usip.org/library/truth.html#guatemala> target=_blank

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[11] <http://web.amnesty.org/report2004/gtm-summary-eng> target=_blank

[12] <http://www.theherald.co.uk/features/47477-print.shtml> target=_blank

[13] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2741417.stm> target=_blank



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