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Guatemalan Farm Laborers Support Accused Drug Trafficker Mauro Salomón Ramírez Barrios

by Louisa Reynolds
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Three months ago, farm laborer Érick Tupul, from Mazatenango, in the eastern Guatemalan department of Suchitepéquez, travelled to Tecún Umán, in the northern department of San Marcos, with the intention of crossing the border with Mexico and making his way to the US in search of employment.

When Tupul asked where he could find a temporary job, locals suggested that he should try his luck at a nearby plantain plantation belonging to Mauro Salomón Ramírez Barrios, known as Don Mauro in the area, who was imprisoned on Oct. 1, 2010, and awaits trial on drug-trafficking and money-laundering charges.

"My plan was to travel to the US, but I found a stable job here and I'll stay while it lasts," says Tupul, who earns between Q85 (85 quetzales, US$10) and Q90 (US$11) a day, above the agrarian minimum wage, currently Q65 (US$8).

A few weeks later, Tupul's wife and two-year-old son joined him in Tecún Umán.

Another farm laborer, known as The Mexican, travelled in the opposite direction. As he lifts three heavy bunches of fruit, he explains that he came from the state of Veracruz, in Mexico, in search of temporary employment and never returned.

Ramírez's half-hectare plantation employs some 50 laborers, who claim that they receive sick pay and free medical checkups for themselves as well as their families, basic rights seldom observed on most Guatemalan fincas (plantations).

Farm manager Jorge Guillén explains that three pickup trucks leave the farm each day, heavily laden with fruit packed in transpirable plastic bags that speed up the ripening process, generating profits of approximately US$320 per truck. About 20% of the farm’s produce is exported to Central America, and the remaining 80% is sold on the domestic market.

Don Mauro’s supporters

About 100 residents from Colonia La Verde, the neighborhood surrounding the farm, often gather by the main gate, carrying placards, some written in broken English with spelling mistakes, demanding that Ramírez be set free, as they did on Oct. 8, 2010, when the alleged drug trafficker faced his first court hearing in Guatemala City.

Ramírez, also known as León de Mar, faces possible extradition to the US after the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) accused him of receiving cocaine cargos from Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru and transporting them to Mexico via maritime routes.

On Sept. 15, 2010, Guatemalan Independence Day, Ramírez’s name made the headlines after the police staged a chaotic operation in the Tikal Futura shopping mall in Guatemala City to capture
the alleged drug trafficker. Terrified shoppers fled the scene when police opened fire on Ramírez’s bodyguards in the parking lot, and authorities later came under strong criticism for risking civilian lives.

Ramírez managed to escape but was captured on Oct. 2 in the department of Suchitepéquez.

"Please do not take him to USA. He is not guilty of all the charge. He is innocent," read one placard.

The protestors, mostly women, explain that they wrote the placards in English so that the demonstration would be broadcast on US TV channels and the extradition request would be annulled. "If it wasn’t for him, we wouldn’t have a school," said Marely Isabel López, one of the protestors, who carried Ramírez’s picture.

Some protestors are wives of farm laborers, and others, such as López, work at the chicken factory Comercializadora Avícola La Granja, in the nearby municipality of Ocós, which also belongs to Ramírez.

The Ministerio Público (MP) found Q210,000 (US$26,000) during a raid on the chicken factory in February 2010.

The women complain that, after Ramírez was arrested and imprisoned, the factory was closed and they were left unemployed. "He [Ramírez] owns what he has because he works hard. Unlike him, the government has never bothered to open a factory that would give us a job," said 70-year-old Benigno Méndez emphatically.

Ramírez’s supporters insist that he is "an honest farmer" and that all his fortune—the MP confiscated 11 vehicles, US$2.2 million and Q400,000 (US$50,000) in cash and Q1 million (US$125,000) in various bank accounts—comes from the inheritance that his wife, Marizabel González Guzmán, received from her late parents.

The local pre-primary school, Escuela Oficial de Párvulos No. 3 de Colonia La Verde, with 157 pupils, is a few streets away from the plantation. Headmistress Alison Becerra explains that, with the implementation of free education under the Colom administration and the conditioned cash transfer program Mi Familia Progresa (NotiCen, July 24, 2008), which grants poor families Q300 (US$38) a month provided that their children go to school and get regular medical checkups, the school population increased from 80 to 157 pupils.

The old school building could not cope with the sudden surge in pupils, and the mayor said that he was unable to help. Some parents suggested that Becerra should talk to Don Mauro. Becerra said that she found him sitting on the pavement, outside his house, and that he did not hesitate to offer assistance. A few days later, the school moved to one of his properties.

Drug kingpins and their populist strategies

Indigenous leader Omar Jerónimo, of Plataforma Agraria, explains that organized crime weaves its way into the fabric of society by providing basic services such as education and health care in remote areas of the country that have been forgotten by the state. "In some communities drug traffickers build homes for newlywed couples, and, when a woman is beaten by her partner, she complains to the local mafia boss and asks him to intervene," says Jerónimo.
Colombian sociologist Ricardo Vargas says that drug trafficking does not always go hand in hand with "populist strategies" such as creating employment or social services that secure the loyalty and support of local communities.

Vargas explains that this phenomenon—which can be clearly observed in Guatemala today—also existed in Guatemala during the 1980s. "These criminals need protection, which is why the silence of the local population becomes crucially important," he says.

Vargas adds that, in the case of Mexico, these populist strategies evolved into a far more violent and aggressive scene in which communities have been terrified into compliance, whereas Colombia has turned into "a mafia state," where organized crime is so embedded in the government apparatus that the support that local communities can provide becomes less important.

Nevertheless, Vargas says that one phase does not automatically lead to another. In Guatemala, the presence of "the populist narco" has already been noted while the country is showing symptoms of the Colombian-style mafia state, with drug traffickers running for mayors or congressional deputies in the general elections and cartels bribing judges and prosecutors.

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